

Two Blue Dwarfs

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Category: Halo

Genre: Adventure, Suspense

Language: English

Status: Completed

Published: 2007-12-19 06:05:17

Updated: 2007-12-19 06:05:17

Packaged: 2016-04-27 00:02:40

Rating: T

Chapters: 1

Words: 54,569

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: The second of a twofilm story, this tale catalogues the necessary steps taken towards cleaning up the mess left by the mole in the previous film. Screenplay is written by a member.

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****Scene One **_**Gross Total**_**

Silence echoed down the barren, empty stone corridorâ€¦ but there lingered a coil of smoke barely as big around as a pencil, twisting through the air much like as if there were currents with the strength of zephyrs pulling on it. At one end of the hall, a juncture, passageways branching off and leading in all directions. At the other, a large double door, closedâ€¦ but it was always closed, only opening when someone sought passage through. There was no lock, but each passing was loudly announced with the stiff groan of such a great door swinging open on long aged hinges. It didn't squeak more as to speak, almost, a portal between the vast chamber beyond it and the outside world, whispering and moaning to the history of each one to pass under the crumbling stone archway within which it rested.

There was no one around to hear it speak, now, though, no one to listen to that ancient, wizened voice that owned no vocabulary, that said volumes yet spoke no words. The door, however well used in the days before chaos, now lay untouched, unused, silent and still. No one would come to pass through the halls, none to push through the doors, none who would seek entry to the chamber beyond.

Sunlight streamed to the paved floor through pylons that made up for the south wall, the spaces between pillars open to passage into a crumbling, dying garden. There were still a few small signs of green thereâ€¦ but even these didn't look as though they would last too long. Brown and grey closed their dull grips around the edges of the

leaves, taming them for decomposition back to the soil from whence they had come.

Above the pavilion, the sky held testament to smoke, fires many hundreds of feet tall roaring above what fuel it could find, and consuming it all to ash. Contrails and streaking lines torn through the smoke and airborne ash took note of flight—the passage of something small going quickly from hither to yon without waypoint or pause.

Out of one shadowed corner, passing through the dappled sunlight, a dark, almost perfectly invisible form moved. Not a whisper of sound escaped it's expert steps, as it passed first the pavilion, then took down the row of columns towards that far end of the hall where the great set of double doors sat, waiting.

The form wavered, as a pall of smoke wafted past, trying to go through but instead outlining the figure briefly. It paused at the door, and looked back. Lines and shading began to flow across it, forming mass, shape and color, until at last what stood before the door was not a formless apparition, perhaps come to visit the scene of it's demise, but a fully alive and relatively healthy being— a heavily armed and armored adult Sangheili warrior.

D1NG0 turned from the place he had just passed through, and carefully pressed his palm to the door, easing it open slowly so it would speak softly rather than announce his arrival. When it had parted enough for him to pass, he slipped through, and after scanning the room beyond with his eyes, slid the door closed behind him to mask his passage through. Stepping lightly, he slipped past the empty desk through the doorless entryway into the massive partitioned chamber formerly known as the Archives. There wasn't much left of it now—the wind teased at hanging electrical lines, scraps of wall hangings that had somehow clung to their places throughout the bombardment. The room was open to the sky, now, and with the light sheen of moisture on the winds it would soon know what it felt like to be rained on again.

D1NG0 turned from the sight of the destruction, pacing quickly and quietly across to the second entrance, since the third had been crushed flat. Much of the city ruin was just that, now— in ruins. The shield had held for longer than anyone had hoped, but in the end it had still failed, unable to withstand the beating the orbital vessels had given it. Now there were ground teams, swarms of Jiralhanae, Kig-yar and Unggoy, searching the place for their prey.

The Mirratord had been found— despite his demise before sending the last signal, the mole had done his job, and with some determined scanning the small fleet had found them, at long last, and were making all kinds of interesting hell. D1NG0 saw motion out of the corner of his eye, but he knew it wasn't ambient the moment it registered in his brain. His camouflage had worn out, and would need more time to recharge, but he didn't have that advantage anyway— he'd been seen, and his only choice now was to react with as much of his skill as he owned. He turned on a hoof, plied a sword from his belt and activated it, bringing it down and then around and up to meet the—

"Well, look who."

DlNG0 let out a breath and scowled at his fellow member. "One of these days, Aardvark, you are going to get either myself or yourself very dead, and it won't be my fault."

The female only smiled at him, taking her own sword down and deactivating it. "Come â€" the Admiral has gathered the rest of the Strike Team at the Mausoleum. We need to find a way to cripple this assault if we can't wipe it out entirely. Anything they see or think they see is incriminating, and it cannot leave this planet." She stepped around him, and past.

DlNG0 rolled his eyes, sighed, and followed. Gods above but she could be so _weird_ sometimes. He switched off his sword, and hooked it on his belt as he walked, not bothering or needing to look to see what he was doing.

****Scene Two **_**Spots Of Sun**_**

Hoof prints littered the sooty floor in layers, but without knowing what had happened at the location one might assume there had been hundreds of Sangheili passing through â€" when in fact there had been less than fifteen. It was merely a high traffic area.

Lai Tasha stood arms akimbo watching the passage from a hidden vantage point, well aware the enemy was everywhere and time was at a premium. Through the bullet-ridden ceiling he could see one of the cruisers had parked overhead, and the gravity lift marked a bright purple stain against the deep burgundy sky. Dusk was just hours away.

His element. His warrior's element. The enemy didn't know what they had stumbled across, even if the Mirrator had been their intended target all along.

"Lai."

He tilted his head, to see both behind him and where he was watching as well. "What is it?"

"Contact has been made at the East Bridgesâ€" it was cleaned up and kept quiet, but the amount they had to eliminate will make hiding the incident harder than might well be worth the bother." Soulguard answered, softly. He was mere feet from his fellow Councilor- there was no need to raise his voice and all the reasons in the world not to.

"I have confirmed reports of a division moving through the city proper on the upper level." The Lone Heretic added, from farther off in the inky shadow. "Have the scouts in the Library Quarter reported in yet?"

"I have heard nothing but silence." Lai responded. "But my senses tell me someone draws near- one of our own, judging by the level of care taken with the length and speed of the stride."

"Click them. We don't need to be ambushed." Lone mentioned, sounding half distracted. He was still listening to someone else speaking, over a communications unit. Soul glanced in his direction, then looked past Lai in time to see the Councilor move ever so slightly, tapping his own comn.

Lai smiled slightly when he got the reply- three times, a two-four beat. That had to be Aardvark. Only she would have the audacity to drum the tune in her head through a click communication. At the near end of the curving hall, he spotted something that looked remotely like part of a face but the image confused him. It only made sense when the whole thing turned around the corner, and it turned out to have been a mirror in an outstretched hand to peer around and see if it was clear. He didn't speak or move, well aware the approaching would note his presence without such tells soon enough on their own.

His expression turned interested when a second figure turned the corner, maintaining a wise distance from the first. Passing around the first dot of failing sunlight, Aardvark went ahead and went through the second, arriving twenty seconds before her tail did and it was DINGO.

"Where did you find him?" Lai asked.

"Sightseeing, sir." She answered. "He's good for go. So am I- I saw sign of enemy passage but no warm bodies while I was out there."

"And the Admiral?"

"So far so good- at least such was the case when I left."

"You said we were going to where the Admiral was." DINGO protested.

"No I didn't- I merely mentioned what his endeavor was at the moment."

He sighed, but let it drop. Lai looked him up and down. "Where were you when the first bombardment started, DINGO, and how come no one could find you?"

"I was in the craft bays, Councilor from there I went the first direction I thought might afford some cover from all the fire. I got a little lost before I was able to find the Mains, by which point all the orbital shooting had stopped."

"What does it look like, out there?"

"Bad in bits and pieces." DINGO answered.

"Nothing is left?"

"Not as much as would be useful, sir but it would be dandy cover in a firefight. I saw a lot of Brutes I didn't attack because I didn't know where anyone else was."

"Good, you might have committed suicide upon them. Are you familiar with the surface/underground passageway comparisons?"

"Vaguely why?"

"They have blown a number of holes through the upper walks, and we plan to use them to spring up behind any overhead passing enemy. They

haven't gotten past the Generator room yet, and we don't intend to let them, at least not until we have sufficiently evacuatedâ€¦ if they blow those generatorsâ€¦"

"Ouch."

"We _all_ go sky high." Lai finished.

Sparing the two a brief glance, Aardvark moved past them, deeper through the shadow they had clustered in. Soulguard's eyes sparkled in reflection of an outside light source as he turned his head, following her motion with his gaze even though he really couldn't see her that well. He wasn't really listening when she waved for Lone's attention, and then began to speak with him. He wasn't really listening to the operatives on the other end of his comn, either â€" there was something causing the light spots up the long end of the curved hall to blink, but it wasn't any brighter than the shadows between them.

He narrowed his eyes, wondering if there really was anything there at all, or if it was above them, in the city proper on the surface. After several more minutes of concentrated study, he determined this to be the case, and leaned back, content with his conclusion. Tapping his comn, he said, "Say that again, over."

The comment got Lai's attention, and what he had been saying to D1NG0 died in mid-sentence. "What changed?" He questioned.

"Thought I saw something." Soulguard gestured past them both, down the corridor. They looked where he was pointing in time for the blinking sequence to repeat itself- at the rate of blockage, it had to be a casual walk, which meant the enemy were patrolling the area rather than searching it. Which meant here had suddenly become either a very good or a very bad place to hide- at least until the invading forces found an entrance to the sub-city.

"Aardvark told me the Admiral was doing something- she was non-specific." D1NG0 mentioned, still looking at the blinking light streams. They would go out, soon, being comprised of sunlight streaming through bulletholes, and what with the sun going down quickly.

"If he is engaged in any specific activity it is not to my knowledge- only that he has bedded down under the Library with a number of other warriors, including the rest of the Strike Team." Lai answered, turning his head to look at him. D1NG0 chose to meet his gaze, then. "What we need to attend and haven't done yet is find a way to be rid of those ships. We cannot suffer this kind of attention."

"Yeah, that's what she said." D1NG0 muttered. "I fail to see how. There's too many of them to get through even playing nonexistent, because they're all elbow-to-elbow out there. You couldn't squeeze an infant Unggoy through that mess."

Lai's responding smile was grim. "We have been overrun- there are three cruisers, one of which is still in orbit, the other two holding position directly over this city- some of the troops use the gravity lifts, others deploy in Phantoms. And the Seraphs and Banshees are everywhere."

"I saw." DLNG0 nodded. "How long would it take for them to determine they can't win, and call in reinforcements?"

"Not long at all. We don't mind so much that- we can be long gone by then. It's the sheer numbers here that is the problem â€" oh, we can take them, that's not a big deal, but it would take too long. We don't have the _time_ for this, DLNG0. I can't authorize much action because we are walking directionless at this point."

"The stream of incoming enemy would never cease, for the time it takes to kill the ones already here." DLNG0 agreed. "I see your problem â€" and with some of them hanging backâ€| just popping the generators as we leave won't take them all down."

"And our stealth craft cannot take on a cruiser â€" let alone bring one down."

"How can we lure the last cruiser in without it first shooting a signal off?" DLNG0 wondered aloud. "I admit, I see your situation, Councilorâ€| and it is quite the situation to be in. I apologize- I have no ideas."

"No one has yet." Lai muttered, unhappily.

****Scene Three **_**Arch-Fiend Of The Arch-Nemesis**_**

At the apex of the arch sat a skinny lizard, but though it was watching him, he wasn't paying it that much mind. Aozora knew the creature was there, even had noticed it crawling to the perch upon which it now hunkered. But he had better things with which to occupy his mind.

To his left stood Warbirds, to his right, but farther off, was his mate; Kuro no Alice. Apart from her utter shock to find him in the Mirrator'd, Kuro had adjusted well enough, and just in time for the whole situation to become unhealthy for them all. In part he was glad she was there â€" in partial morale and partially so he might know her status at all times rather than becoming concerned for her well being when he needed to be focused. Doubly, though, he wasn't very pleased that she had arrived only to witness their fortress become overrun with enemy who should not have known they were there in the first place. Aozora cast his glance up at the lizard, then looked at Warbirds. "Ideas, brother?"

Warbirds' responding smile was grim indeed. "Ideas, no."

"We cannot continue to hide forever. Has anyone heard from the Councilors?"

Warbirds shrugged. "I haven't asked since the last time you did. And you would know if I had heard anything, soâ€|"

"Why can't we just go out there and kill them all?" Interrupted a third voice, from behind the two males.

Aozora turned partway to look back at Evilkitty. "Not until the Councilors say we can."

Evilkitty gave her best pout, but all it got her was an amused grin from Kuro as Aozora turned his back again. She sighed, and crossed

her arms over her armored chest. Aardvark had left their company several hours ago, presumably to hunt D1NG0 down, but it had been long enough that even optimistic Evilkitty was beginning to wonder if she had stopped out for a bath and a massage. She looked around, clicking her mandibles in thought as she surveyed the sub-city passage juncture.

She about freaked right out of her skin when her thought train was derailed by her com unit clicking unnaturally loudly. She looked down at it, wide eyed, then up again, quickly, squinting into the deepening shadows. There was the almost signature feeling of her skin crawling, something she always got whenever Aardvark tried to come up behind her. Frowning, she turned back the other way, looking over her own shoulder.

"Wrong direction, hon."

Evilkitty snapped back again, this time to find herself staring into the dark sapphire eyes set into a smooth face under a black scrollwork embossed helm. Aardvark smiled at her, less than six inches away, even as she noted a larger form moving past on her left â€" D1NG0, no doubt. "You, uh." Evilkitty started.

"Me, uh." Aardvark mocked. "Yes, I caught you this time. One day I'm going to get good at this, and then you'll be sorry you were so liberal with that shock stick." She turned to the side, and walked past. Evilkitty watched her go past, scowling, but when she saw Kuro's expression, it turned into an amused mischievous grin. If there was one thing Aozora's mate detested, it was having to stand there and watch as Aardvark spoke to him. Evilkitty tried not to evoke the same sentiment, but then the situation wasn't quite the same with her â€" Kuro and Aardvark had spoken, even prior to Kuro's inclusion to the Mirrator, as well as having an impeccable sense of honor she would kill to preserve â€" The Lone Heretic was the only thing, Evilkitty was sure, that held Kuro's tongue.

Aardvark was a complex creature, made of something foreign to everyone here. At times Evilkitty was convinced she was going to kill her, but other times she would act as though they were best friends â€" all dependant on a mood. Evilkitty had to admit, though, that she was beginning to understand why everyone else in the Mirrator was scared silly of the female.

"Hey!"

Evilkitty jumped, spooked. "Huh?"

"Come on, already." Warbirds waved at her. "You're not paying attention again."

"You think she's got a boyfriend?" D1NG0 asked, as the group set out down the hall towards one of the opened, collapsed areas.

Evilkitty scowled at the backs of their heads, but quickly erased the expression to neutral when Aardvark turned hers and looked back at her. The last time she had scowled at Aardvark, she'd encountered that murderous mood, and she didn't want to do that again. "Do we get to do something now?" She asked.

"You really _weren't_ paying attention, were you?" Aardvark asked,

pausing mid stride to fall to the back of the group where Evilkitty was. "I spoke with the Councilors before I came back here. Even though we can't figure out and execute a viable plan to deal with our problem, we can't just sit here and wait to be found. So yes â€" I hope your fingers are feeling well today, because here is your chance to really hurt someone with their own attire."

Evilkitty winced. "You heard about that one, huh?"

"Actually, I thought it was rather amusing." Aardvark answered, tonelessly. For some reason, she tended to converse about either irritating or amusing topics without even hinting at either sentiment. It made it hard to tell if she was being serious or not.

"Maestro didn't." She said, plucking at the side of her helmet.

"Maestro's sense of humor is limited, at best." Aardvark glanced at her. "You of all people should know that, seeing as how you communicate most of the time."

"How I communicate?" Evilkitty asked, wondering if she ought to be offended or proud.

Aardvark looked ahead, smiling â€" but she failed artfully to answer, leaving Evilkitty guessing.

****Scene Four **_**Domino Effect**_**

Aozora hand-signaled all stop, as he inched forward with his active camouflage masking his form against the brick behind him. Warbirds stayed nearby in case there wasn't time following any incident to react.

Concealed between the pylons, each of the following members of the Strike Team hunkered down and held their positions, waiting and watching in total silence. It had been a very long time since the entire team had worked together in this manner, but these were extraordinary circumstances that demanded exceptional reaction. Soulshadowman stood directly behind the Admiral and forward Zealot, well knowing the pair worked well together and he could only get in the way if he were any closer. Behind him was DINGO, as the rear position was shared in kind between Aardvark and Evilkitty, practically shoulder to shoulder. It was unknown how well the girls worked together, as they never before had done anything of the kind, but as much as Evilkitty had been irritable of late, for now Aardvark was empathetic and forgiving; in such a state, it had been speculated that she could easily witness high treason and murder and still forgive the infraction.

The theory had not been tested, though, nor was anyone willing to ask her. For the split second in which the area was quiet, Evilkitty could almost feel the female beside her, almost aware of every molecule around her, as if experiencing an extended sense of the assassin-bard's abilities. Right as she averted her eyes from the area ahead of them to look at Aardvark, though, an enormous crashing collapse happened in front of Aozora, causing the Admiral to backpedal in surprise and alarm.

The Strike Team watched in a combination of awe and disdain as the destruction rendered to their base was multiplied, but the methods were far from orthodox. Brutes and Jackals began to pick themselves up out of the collapsed rubble that had at one point been the ceiling of the underground juncture.

With a single motion, the Admiral sent his Strike Team ahead, and as one they fell upon the unsuspecting, dazed enemy even before some of them had gotten completely unburied again, slicing them apart where they lay or stood. It wasn't long at all before there was naught but blood and meat to decry their presence, but it was passing evidence at best. Even as dust and gravel settled over the piled detritus, no other whisper of noise could be heard with the passage of the Mirratord Strike Team.

Moving now across the rubble to the top, and dispersing into the city proper, the Strike Team covered the grounds between the collapse and the reacting forces alerted to the location by the enormous crash within seconds. Evilkitty felt the stones beneath her hooves shifting, but she didn't have time to glance down. It was by instinct alone she understood her " their " footing was not secure. Even as she picked out the first three wavering forms of distortion her teammates put off, she heard the telltale rumble of impending collapse. This area had been compromised as well " and with the drumming of feet across it, she doubted it would last much longer. A Brute stepping near her position slammed a foot down on an octagonal stone, and it sank a good inch before he lifted that foot again, for the next running step.

Her pulse racing in anticipatory adrenalin rush, Evilkitty moved without call to close the gap between herself and Aardvark " the only one she understood could make the others see what was about to happen right underneath them all, if they didn't already know.

A hand clamped around her arm, and swung her to a stop, so she spun partway to find herself feeling soft breath on her face. From somewhere inches ahead of her, she could just pick out the beginnings of a shape, a head" a face.

"It's going to "." Evilkitty started, but the individual's other hand touched her mandibles, commanding silence.

They know. It wasn't so much spoken as implied. _Move!_ She was released, and immediately lost sight of the other. Trailing along across the broad passage between buildings she could see another distortion, this one holding something of a tell " the Admiral, his motions marked by experience in combat. Nearby was Warbirds, complimenting the Admiral's motions. The pair had worked together for long enough to know what to do with the other's actions when in combat, something few attained. For a split second, Aozora called the order, and almost as one the Team fell back into the Brutes, colliding and felling them, cutting them apart without hardly pausing between targets. A near miss between DLNG0 and Soulshadowman caused the former's shields to flare up briefly, but they vanished again too quickly for any of the bewildered and panicked Brutes to sight on him.

Evilkitty could sense the fighting was hastening the loosening of the infrastructure beneath their feet, and before it was over she had fought her way to one side and begun to back away from it, having no

desire to be caught in a collage of falling stone, mortar and brick. Still, even as she watched, the members of the Strike Team she could see from her vantage point one by one cleared the area even as it started from the edges, falling seemingly one brick at a time.

The sight was spectacular, fountains of ground mortar dust spraying into the air, sinking stones followed by helpless Covenant, dropping at different speeds, some of them falling out from sight in seconds, others dropping almost in slow motion. Most of them had been killed already, but those that had been left screamed and bellowed, clawing at the open air above them as they fell. As the dust billowed upwards from the new hole, caught on the wind and began to blow away, Evilkitty turned to see down into it.

Nothing remained of the dispatch. The collapse was absolute.

****Scene Five **_**Brutal Torching**_**

"Lai! Down!"

High Councilor Lai Tasha spun to see who had spoken, moving to a crouch even as he did so, but his reaction to the following event was not to flee or hide " even as Lone took the full brunt of the fuel rod to the chest, Lai turned about and charged at the Brute responsible for firing it. Behind him, he could hear his fellow Councilors gathering behind him, but there was no time to pause to dig Lone out of the far wall " not that he couldn't perform that action himself well enough " there seemed an entire division had been created out of cannon-toting Brutes just to seek and rout the Council's presence.

Lai slammed hard into the first Brute, sending his second shot wild into the roof above them. They tangled briefly, rolling across the floor, but when they came to a stop, Lai was the only one to rise, his Mirrator'd swords active, hot and angry. Omega carved a line through a second Brute's throat, halving his jaw and opening his chest down to his navel, at which point the Brute's backward momentum took him out of the Councilor's reach. Soulguard, having arrived right behind an REG Omega, took a Brute each under the jaw with empty hands, and slammed them both into the ceiling above them, smashing both of their skulls in with the force of the blow, but when he let go, he had to twist between their falling bodies to avoid being smashed in reply, on the floor. Unleashing a single-blade, he sliced crosswise at the cannon aimed at Lai, halving the instrument before he then slammed it all the way to the hilt into the side of the wielder's ribs. Apart from the immediate fight, a pair of Brutes took aim and fired, one missing cleanly when Omega turned out of the flight path and the other missing only in part; though Lai saw it coming and he did duck, he was too close to the far wall and became showered in a choking cloud of detritus " as well as a few bigger bricks. Staggering off his balance away from the area, he paused to straighten his senses, as Omega hit the one and Soul hit the other, like fists attached to a single warrior, a simultaneous blow between two separate beings.

Lai reached past them, releasing a fire star, and the plasma-fueled device sawed right through the next Brute's helmet and head, to continue into the chest of the one behind the first. Shoving his latest victim aside, Soulguard realized too late he'd just opened himself for an already aimed and primed opponent, but all the rod did

when it struck him was blast him backwards thirty yards and wind him with impact " not to mention irritate him a little.

He didn't have time to pick himself up, though, before he was lifted to his hooves by The Lone Heretic " the pair shared an amused grin before racing back into the embattled fray, cutting a swath through their enemy until there was none. At one point, Lai was hit by a larger Brute's fist, and it sent him sailing at Lone " the Councilor's only reaction to that was to catch Lai midair and reverse his trajectory so he came sailing right back at that offending Brute, and he hit swords first.

Shields crackled between them, as the armored Brute roared in fury at the Elite pushing him back. Omega threw down the next to last of his minions, and ended him with a sideways kick to the head that snapped the unfortunate Brute's neck. Soulguard angled towards the gold-armored Brute holding Lai off, pressing him from another angle. Past Omega, Lone took a flying leap, and landed squarely against the last Brute, crushing it into the stones behind it. Rebounding, he collided with the gold-armored one from the left right as Omega hit from the right, blasting all the breath from the beast and defeating his words and his motions. Shrugging them both off, though, the Brute clawed a gravity hammer from his back, and though Soulguard successfully got it from him before he could swing it, he swiped it right back again, sending Soul back hard enough to crush several of the wall stones where he hit. Gagging, Soul dropped to his knees, needing to regain his wits before reengaging.

Lone rolled from his place on the floor and kicked at a knee, but it wasn't there when the blow should have landed, sending his action into an overextension and making him snarl. Omega folded up from the floor and slammed both swords down on what he presumed was the beast's shoulder, attempting to sever the arms being used to wield that hammer, but both swords sizzled harmlessly across a sparking shield, and his useless press earned him an elbow straight to the head, flipping him over so fast he landed face down.

Lai looked up in time to see what was generating that force field, but had to duck to the side before the hammer would have come down on top of him. Seeing an opening in the gloating, over-extended Brute's defenses, he leapt up and hit hard, sinking his claws deep into anything he could get them to catch on, but before the Brute had even decided what to do about that, let alone act on it, Lai had flipped open the lighter he played with when his hands were otherwise idle, and the flames went right through the otherwise impervious shielding, and caught the unbathed Brute's oily hide directly.

Thrown, Lai hit badly, and spent a long several seconds fighting down the urge to curl up, fighting to get his body back to his hooves, but before he'd made it to his knees, the whole Council looked up to witness the howling Brute go storming away down the hall, hammer forgotten, trailing a blazing inferno in his wake and shedding ash that had once been hair.

Lone looked back at Soulguard, but he only shook his head, puzzled. Omega caught their looks, but when the three looked back at Lai, he only sat back on his heels, and flipped the zippo closed. He looked up, then, feeling their eyes upon him, and hesitated.

Lone was the first to grin like a fool. Lai tucked the zippo away,

watching as one by one his fellow Council members began to chuckle and then laugh, heartily, at the sheer notion of what Lai had done to that Brute when all else seemed to fail utterly. It wasn't long before Lai was laughing with them, reveling in the moment of mirth. It might well be a long spell before there was anything to laugh about again.

****Scene Six **_**Winning By A Landslide**_**

Aozora pushed the brick as big as he was off of his leg, rubbed the armor where a bruise hid, and stood up. The city was slowly shaking itself apart, what with the ship-engine vibrations being sent through it, the stomping and storming troops pelting down the hollow roads, and the intermittent explosions happening between warring parties. He wasn't sure why the whole building hadn't come down yet, but he was glad it had not.

Finding Warbirds a few feet away, he pushed the rubble off of him and helped him to his feet. "Is everyone still here?" Warbirds asked, swatting some of the finer grit from the seams of his armor.

"I haven't looked." Aozora admitted. "Come brother â€" I have a feeling they too may need to be unburied as we were." He brushed a small collection of pebbles and dust from Warbird's back, and sent him one direction while he went another. Seeking out the members of the Strike Team one by one, Aozora barely missed falling through a weakened portion of the street that was as yet still holding upâ€" even if the next vibrational wave would see it quickly down into the subterranean juncture beneath it. Scrambling up the side of a building, he gathered up his legs and pressed into a backflip from the wall, landing on his hooves where the ground was not under such risky conditions. From there he spotted Kuro, shaking the grit out of her helmet and wiping it from her face.

"Now, correct me if I'm wrong, butâ€"|" she began, dropping the helm back onto her head and looking at him, "most of that wasn't part of the plan, was it?"

Aozora just shook his head; past her, he could see the lengthening shadow of more Brutes, coming with portable lights. The sun had long since set, but the ship hovering above the city was flooding parts of it with light anyway. Ushering her from the area, he met up with Warbirds, D1NG0, and Soulshadowman.

"Admiral, we have company, inbound." D1NG0 said.

"More?" He asked, suddenly concerned. "I saw an approaching party as well. Where from?"

"West, up from what's left of the gardens."

"Good timing." Aozora grumbled. "Is everyone here? Where are the girls?"

"We haven't found them yet, sir." Warbirds told him. "But we need to hurry. Everyone fan out." He waved at the pair with him, but though not obliged in any way to obey a command given by Warbirds, Aozora went as well. He understood that Warbirds had only spoken first, before he could. A muffled cry soon told them all that someone else had been found, but only one.

Aozora turned to see, though, when he heard the approaching Brutes much closer than he thought they ought to be. His gaze was drawn upwards when he saw motion in the sky, his expert eye picking out Brutes wearing jump jets making sweeps of the city, seeing more than one street at a time. He snarled, and scrambled on, fighting with the loose, unevenly fallen rubble of the collapse to make good time as well as uncover anything that might be one of his own. He moved sideways across the low end, where there was nowhere else to fall to, tracing the grey shaded shapes with his eyes and trying to pick one in particular from it all. As light passed overhead, something shiny glinted up at him, and he turned to see what it had been.

Kneeling in the gravel and stones, Aozora lifted the single blade from the mess, and looked at it. "Oh, no." Scooping it from the debris, he fastened the item to his belt before digging furiously through the heaps of dust, gravel, rocks and bricks, fully uncovering a slain Brute before shoving it out of the way in his efforts.

At a glance he saw who it was when Kuro slid down the steep incline of the side of the collapsed sinkhole to join him at the bottom, but the pause to identify who it was, was all he gave. She sifted through some of the smaller chunks of detritus before straightening and posing her question. "What or who are you so adamant about digging up down here?"

"This." He turned, and tossed her the sword. She looked at it, and tossed it back before moving past him and wresting with a rather large, mortared chunk of many bricks and stones still assembled in one large piece. Aozora helped her push it to one side, but neither could make it go far, and it came to rest very near where it had originally fallen before as one the mated pair scraped and clawed away the underside of said block.

Their efforts revealed first fingers, and then the hand, and arm attached to it, but no more could be uncovered unless near to the entire collapse was lifted from the hole. The armor surrounding the arm, embossed and scrolled upon, had cracked and was broken. "No, no!" Kuro scraped her claws across the bigger piece, but all it served to do was dull them. "Help me lift this." She implored.

Instead, at the insistent sound of approaching ranks, Aozora turned the arm to press a thumb on the wrist between the tendons. His head lowered. "There is no point and no time."

His gaze was drawn upwards again when he heard someone step near the edge and look in, and the form looked to be DINGO. Next to him appeared Warbirds, holding Evilkitty up. Yards away he saw Soulshadowman crest the edge, each of them silhouetted against the stained sea of stars behind them. With a sigh, he shook his head, and made his way up to them.

"Find something, Admiral?" Warbirds asked, extending his other hand to help his superior over the last ledge to the top.

"Yes, but not what I would have liked. There is no way of knowing for sure with what time we have. We must hope the Brutes overlook this area and allow us to return."

"What are you saying?" DLNG0 asked, striding across the gap between them. "Did you find something or didn't you?" Between them, Kuro pushed from the hole, and straightened to witness the converse in silence.

Aozora looked at him. "Yes, I found somethingâ€¦ but not someone." He extended the single blade to him, and he looked at it, rubbing his fingers across the fine etching all across the silver-plated hilt. Some of the scrollwork was filled with a grey-purple paste, but it was coated in a fine layer of grit from the broken mortar between the stones and bricks, guising the prints.

"You're not going to dig for her?" Evilkitty demanded, as Kuro took the blade from DLNG0's grasp. She wasn't sure what she was going to do with it, but when next they met up with the Councilors, it would serve as so much more than a mere weapon.

The only response Evilkitty got was a direct impact to the back by a brute shot grenade, the sound shattering the still and sending her to her knees, despite Warbirds. Her shield protected her from all harm the grenade might have wrought, though, and she flew with the rest of them as they evaded the scissoring pinch between colliding forces of the enemy.

Kuro no Alice kept pace easily with the more experienced Strike Team, but her mind was still at the precipice of the collapse, trying to understand the how and why of it all. The sword in her hand she understood â€" it belonged to Aardvark. No one else had decorated every aspect of their battle-gear with scrollwork etching. Yet the idea that that stubborn little female could be so easily erased from existence by a few good rocksâ€¦ the notion escaped her. Aardvark was too resourceful.

She also, Kuro noted sourly, would never have let go of anything she considered to be hers â€" as kind and forgiving as she could be, she was very possessive of the items she claimed as her own, and shared them with no one. Pausing at a corner, she looked back, trying to see the hole the Brutes had unwittingly dug for their own funerals. All she could see, though, was more Brutes.

DLNG0 appeared in front of her, suddenly, as if from nowhere, and seized her by an arm to propel her along. "Come on! We can't hold off that many!" He hissed at her.

"Wait!" Kuro cried, distressed, counting their number in passing. "We are missing more than just the one!"

"I know." His tone was muted, his resolve unwavered. Wildfire was missing, too.

****Scene Seven **_**Your Eyes, Like A Sparkling Sunâ€¦**_**

The hangar bay looked, to all respects, to be deserted. But the nature of the equipment within it claimed otherwise â€" it was not Mirrator equipment, but New Covenant equipment, and if anyone would understand the difference it was Acetylcholine. He frowned, but it was a signature expression. Only he could do it the way he did it, but he had more than one way to frown, so it was fairly easy to tell what he meant by it.

To his own credit, Longsword Flyer couldn't tell the difference, but he knew what it meant when someone frowned at a situation like the one they were looking at now. He was frowning, too.

"Dude, where's all our junk?"

"Trash man came." Acetyl responded. "Why are there no obvious guards here?"

"Maybe they know we're here." Flyer answered. "I could make a run around the room, have a look?"

"I'm not so much interested in this room, Flyer, as what's beyond it. I need to get to my lab." Acetyl sighed. "There is nothing I hate more than having to rout obscure enemies."

Flyer shook his head. "Oh, just flip your cloak on."

"You want live enemy at your back, Flyer?" Acetyl asked.

"You're suggesting we dig them up and kill them before we pass? Leave a marker on the map to our whereabouts?" Flyer shot back.

"You're impossible." Acetyl grouched. "I should hit you with something sticky and leave you stuck to the floor so you'll learn what it means to be quiet when it counts."

"Glue me to the floor??" Flyer squeaked. "I don't want to be glued to the floor!"

"Bonding minerals are not considered glues. More towards the solvent endâ€| meshing the two correlating components together at the microscopic level so they literally are one piece."

"And how, again, am I going to live the rest of my life as a dad gum floor stone?"

"Not as one. Under them!"

Acetyl and Flyer looked behind them, realizing their bickering had brought company. "Okay, first one's charm." Acetyl said, before both of them broke from the scene for cover. Neither were that great with close combat tools, nor were they good at hand to hand so much. Both had more or less made a living with distance kills, if ever actually directly responsible for anything's death.

"What now?" Flyer called, above the sudden din of howling Brutes at the realization that the enemy had breached their commandeered hangar.

"Hold that thought!" Acetyl responded, clawing small items from his belt loops and pouches. Right in the middle of trying to get two of them to latch together he was found again, and had to run, scattering little pieces all over the place in his wake. The Brute, despite being unharmed for the encounter, fell hard on it's rump when it tried to chase him, stepping on many of those little pieces, causing his feet to slide out from under his bulk.

Flyer dodged a triplicate of flying shot grenades, and ducked behind a stand of crates for cover. "Holding!" He called out. "How much

longer? I got some new thoughts that want to be thunk!"

"Patience!" Acetyl snapped, ducking under a Banshee to lose a fast-closing tail. Turning about, he darted across towards the belly of a Seraph fighter, where he found enough peace to complete his project " with a few added parts pulled out of a hatch on the Seraph's engine ports. "Okay! Think them! Cover your eyes, by the way!" And he primed the device before pitching it at the nearest Brute.

The idiot caught it, seeing immediately it was not a grenade, and peered at it curiously while its maker scrambled away, seeking cover anywhere he could. Flyer saw him go past, and grabbed him, swinging him about and pulling him down behind his own hiding place right as the whole chamber lit up with the most intensive flash of super-luminous fury as anyone had ever witnessed. The light got through Flyer's hands and eyelids, but he had them both pressed against his knees too, so it was merely uncomfortably bright and not damaging.

When he looked up after it had darkened again, he tried to focus on Acetyl, but his fellow Mirrator was'n't even squinting. He peeked over the crates, then hopped out from behind them, and started for the far door, not even acting the least bit phased.

"Wait!" Flyer called, scrambling after him while rubbing his burning eyes. "What in gods name was that? And why didn't it affect you?"

Acetylcholine looked back at him. "I already did that stunt to myself once" needless to say I learned my lesson then." He reached up, and hit a catch on the side of his helmet, causing shielding to drop over his eyes. "Comes in handy when someone tries to hit me in the head, too." He grinned, and flipped the shields up again, stowed back into the crown of his helmet. "Come on, it's still a ways yet."

"What did you do to them?" Flyer asked, staggering after him. He looked back, but immediately regretted it. Brutes lay piled in all poses, their softer tissues singed right off " lips, nostrils, eyes from eye sockets. All of it was gone. But the pool of liquefied grey matter pouring out of one of those emptied eye sockets was what lost Flyer his lunch, right before he made the doorway.

"Ach. Don't be doing that in my lab." Acetyl instructed, unsympathetic.

****Scene Eight **_**Amateurs' Ambush**_**

Brutes filed quietly down through the crater, across the settling rubble from the street above and through the gaping passageway that led somewhere beneath the city. It wasn't that deep, but it was enough so that it had taken a pounding like no other to break the street in " similar collapses in embattled areas had prompted the move.

As the light blinked with the passage of shadows, the eyes behind the tinted visor narrowed in thought and cunning. What approached now would soon run the other way, in terror and pain, but there were only two of them there; one stood in a shaded corner, the other crouched under the inky shadow of a fallen pylon. In the faded gloom of

lighting from several halls away, each shadow was absolute, leaving little room for negotiation if one did not have either a lamp or some form of alternative vision, such as night goggles.

Approaching with brutish indignance came a Jiralhanae contingent with lamps. The plan solidified; all the easier to take them down, or change their minds and scatter their tight formation.

The first five Brutes to pass before the hidden pair never saw them, never smelled them. Kept walking. A hand-signal passed between them, and one reached out, smacking a Jiralhanae's wrist so he dropped his lamp.

And suddenly the horror beset them. Bullets flew in screaming trajectories between flailing fists and arms, grenades going every which way as scattering troops sought cover from they knew not what. Robbed of light and bereft of anything that didn't smell of either gunpowder or bare, crumbling rocks, they were running blind.

"09, incoming! Move, move, move!" The cry was most definitely not Sangheili. But in motion, there was no way to know where it would be next. At the detonation of said explosive, the other circled what little cover a small crowd of Brutes had found and emptied a clip into some heads before the compromised gathering realized what was going on — there simply was no visual in the darkened recesses of the subterranean tunnel. It was proving a death trap, as over a three hundred Brutes fell prey to merely two hunters.

"249, I'm out!" Different voice, still not Sangheili.

"Grab something of theirs!" Came the indignant response. "What's your count?"

"Uh." There was a pause, as another unfortunate Brute collapsed screaming to its death. "All of fifty, or so — does it matter?"

"No." He moved sideways to stall a fleeing Brute from reaching the exit, and slammed a fist into its jaw, snapping the mandible in three places and felling the beast with impact force. When it hit, it bawled, before coming back and swiping blindly at the empty air before it, in an attempt at retaliation. From behind came the sickening crunch of bones giving way to superior forces, but it still got out a gargle before it fell, decapitated only in part. "— but it's something to keep you from asking stupid questions."

A Brute wearing armor lit off a grenade, and tried to use it as a flare, to see what he was up against, but it was too close to his eyes to illuminate much for him beyond his own self. Frustrated, he threw it aside, and roared — only to break the outcry short when he heard an almost identical cry from the side he'd discarded the grenade at.

"249!! 249!! I'm hit! I'm hit!" Clawing frantically at the dissolving explosive, the being it was adhered to was cast in a ghostly pallor; but the Brute recognized that form despite, would have recognized it anywhere. A second exactly like it reached the first, tore the explosive from his chest, and was in the process of trying to fling it away when it exploded — and while it threw both Spartans back, neither had lost full shield integrity.

Spartan 09 came back from the push rather angry, though, and he met the offending Brute hard and fast, culling his overlarge, hirsute self from the gene pool with a swift, powerful chop down across the Brute's helmet using the curled blade on the back of the grenade launcher it had held a moment ago in it's own hands.

"Show off." 249 accused, picking himself up. Looking around, he couldn't find his BR, but it only had 33 rounds left in the clip anyway, and that had been the last clip. Getting to the Armory from here was out of the question; the whole city was besieged and more Brutes than these would be between them and said objective. Scooping a pair of spikers, he reloaded their magazines and began policing for more ammo.

"Man. Ruined my emblem." 09 sighed. "And now I have a cup holder in the middle of my breastplate, too."

"Quiet." 249 snapped, irritably. "You're impossible to please even when you _aren't_ under fire, 09. Just suck it up and find that locator."

09 looked around at the mess they had made, shook his helmeted head, and began to walk towards the Brute's entrance. "They collapsed the tunnel we were going to use."

249 let the rifles hang at his sides as he followed, surveying the damage to the Brutes he passed, even as a brief static charge washed over his suit of Mjolnir armor in preparation for shield recharge. "Can it be unburied?" He looked up, at the corridor past 09, then, and realized the answer to his own question. "Nevermind."

"We need another route, 249." Spartan 09 rested the barrel of the Jiralhanae RPG on his shoulder, even as his fellow Spartan stepped up next to him in silence. "So much for that checkpoint."

****Scene Nine **_**Thought The Fat Lady Sang**_**

From the corner of his eye he could see the Brute moving. He had been a big fellow once, something formidable. Little more than smoldering, quivering char now, he had been reduced to less than whole. Fire, it seemed, could do that to a body, even an armored and shielded one. Lai had seen the heap and spared it only a single, mirthless grunt. He, like the rest, had no armor to protect his nostrils, and the thing stunk mercilessly.

Unfortunately, leaving it behind quickly wasn't really such a good idea. The passage narrowed here, and it then curled upwards with a stair, leading to a plaza where Brutes swarmed. It wasn't anywhere particularly appealing to the enemy, it was just a good place to use as a dropoff point for troops deploying deeper into various reaches of the city. And while the troops were no real hesitation, being strafed by ship guns was never fun, with augmented Mirratord gadgetry or without.

Fortunately they didn't need to wait all that long, as the latest deployment of forty or so Brutes headed straight for the stair as their ride began to rise, though the first Jiralhanae reached the top step before his ferrier was completely gone, something that he would not have lived to accomplish had that not been the case. The second

step down from the top was greeted with the Brute's other foot before the third one down was greeted with his head " and subsequently a bath of hot, sticky Jiralhanae blood. The body didn't topple down the steps, though, as gravity would have had it happen, as it was lifted and thrown into the arms of his companions, back on the flagstones of the plaza.

Councilors seemed to pour from the subterranean passage, despite there being only a very small number of them, plowing into the fray with savage efficiency. Lone hadn't bothered to take his swords in hand, but he was large enough and strong enough to physically tear muscle and bones in twain, so it was no hindrance to his effort as he shredded the ones unfortunate enough to be missed or passed up by the other Councilors.

Lai preferred to be more neat about what he did " and for it he tended to go through sword batteries a little faster than Lone. Slicing fast and deep, his viper-quick motions would bring him to and then from an opponent before the next one realized the visitation. Each had their own style, though, as Soulguard ripped the jaw from one Jiralhanae only to slice the head from another, and promptly collapse the larynx on a third without breaking the skin. His fourth kill happened around a crushing blow through the middle of the ribcage, however, and while the Brute died instantly, he still flew back and crashed through something that sounded like pottery when he landed.

By the time the last Brute had attacked foolishly and fallen dead, Lone had finally decided to pull a sword" but all Soulguard saw him do was light it up and then shut it off without actually using it.

"If nothing else, brother," he mentioned, his eyes laughing, "I will know whom to look to when my swords fail me."

Lone just smiled silently at him, pacing across the plaza looking between the freestanding pillars as he walked. More Brutes would be dropped off here, but they hadn't come to claim an LZ. They were moving " regrouping.

Before he reached the far side of the plaza, though, motion in the shaded corner of the covered walk following the outside of that structure froze his steps. He squinted, flexing the fingers of one hand as he tried to pick the shape from the black.

When Aozora blinked into existence barely six paces away, though, he could not deny his instinctual reaction to recoil in fright before calming and frowning at the Admiral. "I really wish you wouldn't do that to me." Lone grumbled. He paused, focusing on the hardened warrior before him as he came to realize something was not right. He didn't bother to look past him, even, when members of the Strike Team started to appear through the doorway of the structure behind Aozora. "What is it? What bothers you, brother?"

He raised a hand, only. "I bring you ill news, Councilor."

Lone narrowed his eyes at him, silent as Soulguard came up on one shoulder and Lai on the other, but Omega sensed something brewing that he knew he didn't want to be too near to, and hung back. "Of what do you speak?" Lone finally asked, allowing his eyes to trace

the length of the Admiral's extended arm to his hand â€" clasped around a single blade hilt.

Aozora turned his hand over, palm-up, and opened his grasp, revealing the fine scrolled etching in the metal sheathing of the device. Puzzled, Lone took it.

"This is Aardvark's." He said, looking from it to Aozora's face. Seeing what lay in the Admiral's eyes froze his expression suddenly. "Where is she?" Somehow it didn't come out sounding like a questionâ€" so much as a demand.

"Loneâ€" Lai began, suddenly catching on. Even as he tried to forestall the inevitable and calm his fellow Council member, he found himself backing up. Though silent, Soulguard wasn't that far off either, one hoof behind the other in slow, calculated succession. If Lone lost it, not hell come down nor high tossing waters would stop his rage from being known. "Easy, brother."

"Admiral!" Lone commanded, harshly. "Where is Aardvark??"

Aozora didn't move from where he stood â€" he knew his armor could not protect him from everything, but he could move faster than Lone under certain circumstances and understood how much leeway he had if things became unstable. "She is dead, Councilor."

Nothing moved â€" nothing breathed, or dared blink. Everyone was watching Lone, waiting for his reaction, just knowing whatever it was, it couldn't be good. But instead of ripping his loss from those around him like limbs from a body, Lone simply lowered his gaze to the blade in his hand, and stared at it in a semblance of numb shock.

He started to move again, blinked once â€" and suddenly Aozora broke for it, rushing out of reach right before he might have been smashed into the wall of the structure behind him by a blind swipe. Stalling his motion abruptly, Aozora kept his gaze leveled on the Councilor, even when he realized he was being specifically targeted at the moment.

"You let her die!" Lone accused, roaring at him, trying to close the gap. "She trusted you, and you led her straight to her end!" It was hardly untrue, but hardly a just accusation, either. Aozora hesitated, trying to figure a next course of action that wouldn't get everyone in the plaza killed, but though a moment before he'd had time to try to think, suddenly Lone had somehow closed that half-second gap faster than he ought to have, and he'd seized the Imperial Admiral by his throat and slammed him hard enough into the wall that it caused his shielding to sizzle in protest.

Lone's expression was far from forgiving, as he drew back his other hand, Aardvark's sword activating in his grasp. Aozora glanced from the raw energy crackling down the length of the weapon to the Councilor's face, aware if he tried to activate his armor's inner mechanisms he would only take the Councilor with him. But Lone didn't move beyond what he already had. Breathing out, he lowered the sword, though it took a moment more before he could make his hand open, to release Aozora. Stepping away, he looked down at the blade, sparing a moment before deactivating it again. "You did all you could. You tried." He was almost whispering. "Just like you always do."

"Lone, Iâ€|" Aozora started, but he stopped before completion without any apparent cause. Shaking his head, he turned away. Nothing he said would make a difference â€" nothing anyone said would. Looking back at the Councilor, he waited, as if expecting something more.

The Lone Heretic finally lifted his gaze, and inhaled slowly as he surveyed the faces that had all turned towards him. "My brothers." He said, acknowledging them. "We all have lost much to this enemy we face."

A muted hum of chorused "Aye." 's followed his words.

"But weâ€| we still have more to lose." Lone focused on Aozora. "Friends. Brothers. Let us drive this beast to its knees and slay it once and for all! Let it know the error it has committed before it dies!"

The response to his cry for vengeance was an even louder chorus of worts and roars. But Lone wasn't really listening. In his mind he pictured a face, could hear a sweet soprano melody, while his gaze rested on a decorated weapon of war. If she really was dead, and not lost, mistakenâ€| he still needed to find her, still needed to see for himself, or he knew he could never believe and never let go or heal.

He looked up when a hand rested on his shoulder, to find Soulguard standing at the end of that arm. "Come, brother. There remains many enemy to kill. Lead us to them."

"I found her because of you." Lone mentioned.

"You told me that once." He inclined his head in acknowledgement.

"What timeâ€|"

"She loved and lived in full, brother, as should we all. Let her memory inspire a likeness of that passionate desire to cherish the here and now, because it is all we have, in the end." Soulguard released Lone's shoulder, and followed him across the covered walk to the entrance to the part of the city that was nearly completely Brute controlled; the Amphitheatre chamber was thereâ€| where she used to sing.

What time, indeed.

****Scene Ten **_**Put The Whip Into Whipper-Snapper**_**

"GAH!"

Flyer recoiled in sudden alarm, unaware what was happening when he could have sworn he was watching their situation and had missed whatever had made Acetyl shout like that. The scientist had stepped back into him, sending them both stumbling away from one another, off their collective balances.

"What happened? What's going on?" Flyer demanded, irate. "What did you do?"

"Hey!" Called a third voice. "Chill, it's okay. It's just me."

Acetylcholine caught a breath and scowled his best at Maestro, even as a trio of companions stepped out of the shadow that had just disgorged Maestro. Flyer recognized one â€" a quiet fellow named Tejan, but the other two were just names attached to faces in a memory file he rarely if ever needed to access. Though technically, he knew none present save himself â€" Acetyl was something of a new acquaintance of his, having been assigned to watch the jitterbug's back while his usual, Evilkitty, went and did Strike Team type things with the Imperial Admiral.

He had to admit â€" it was kind of enlightening. Not fun, and not misery, but it was enlightening enough to keep him intrigued. "Oh, you." Flyer sighed. "This your dispatch?"

"Dispatch? What? No, we're just what's left of the seven that got trapped apart from the others. How many are with you?" Maestro responded.

"Just me and him." Flyer pointed an accusing finger at Acetyl.

"I could dip that in hydrochloric acid, if you'd like." Acetyl offered, staring accusingly back.

"What's hydro-color-ick acid?" Maestro choked, trying to repeat a word he'd only heard once.

"Nevermind." Flyer told him. "Lay off it, Ace, you'd think you were sniffing some of those chemicals you play with. Now." He looked back at Maestro. "Which passage did you come through on? Is the way clear back to his lab?"

"Dependsâ€| where's his lab?"

"I don't think he's been there, Flyer." Acetyl offered.

"Okay, so he hasn't â€" who here has?" Flyer asked. "I not only haven't, but I've been elsewhere with this weird guy and have no idea if he even knows where we're headed."

"I do." One of the three behind Maestro spoke up.

"Well, did you come that way?" Flyer pressed, stepping past Maestro to see the other warrior better.

"No, we didn't." Tejan replied, simply. "But Jiralhanae activity in the area is sporadic at best. There's no guessing from here."

"Thank you." Flyer said, feeling a little relieved that Acetylcholine's lab wasn't just a mental concoction of Ace's. "We can handle anything that comes along if we go together, right? Maestro, have any of you received orders to rendezvous with anyone else? Or can you come along?"

"No, I meanâ€| sure, yes we'll go with you." He made a screwed up face for a moment, then shook his head. "Don't ask yes no questions so fast."

Flyer didn't get a chance to react before Ace laughed in that same eerie way Evilkitty did when she was tickled by something eccentric. "Come along, brothers! I appear to be the only one with an immediate mission in mind."

"Yeah, speaking of which," Flyer mentioned, falling in behind him again as the expanded party resumed moving. "what mission exactly is it that you're on?"

"Something about the ship that isn't in orbit, I dunno much beyond thatâ€¦ why?" Acetyl asked, peering around a corner at a junction before moving past it and on down the hall. "I'll know more when I arriveâ€¦ and have a look at what I have to work with."

"Is it explosive?" Flyer asked, his expression telling that he expected that it was and hoped sorely he was either already dead by then or long ago fled from the scene. The _last_ 'explosive' device of Ace's conjuring was still ringing loudly in Flyer's ears. The left one was the only one that had thus far stopped hurting since that incident.

"That depends entirely on if it has to be." Acetylcholine responded, cheerfully.

****Scene Eleven **_**From Sparta, With Love**_**

Temporary blindness met him when a strobing spotlight swam past his position, lighting everything up for just long enough to polarize his visor and ruin his night vision. He sighed, drumming his fingers on the side of his filched Jiralhanae RPG as he waited for his eyes to adjust back again as well as the auto-polarization to fade from his visor.

"09, what's the hold up?"

"Can't go where you can't see, Spartan." 09 responded, simply.

"Oh. Right, okay." Spartan 249 stepped past his companion and peered down all the available paths, even getting a good look through the bottom of a shelled out structure. "Looks clear." He reported.

"Goodâ€¦ ah, there we go." 09 spared a moment to wipe some of the grit from his visor before having a look around, himself. "Where from here? How far did we go in that last stretch?"

"Three hundred meters. From here we go left, for lack of any alternative routes that don't go up." 249 responded. "Long road ahead, but we're closer than we used to be."

"Whoa." 09 suddenly darted forward, and grabbed the other Spartan before ducking around the nearest corner. "Enemy movement on the motion tracker. Solid wall of it back there." He hissed.

"I didn't see anything." 249 responded.

"You willâ€¦ just wait."

Neither spoke for the next several breaths, but it took a number more before anything showed. First the red markers in their trackers, and

then some forms and shapes followed by faces. Unggoy, this time, mostly. Surprisingly, there was only one pair of Jackals present, flanking the Grunts as they paced ahead of a small group of idly conversing Brutes. If there was scent of anything suspicious, it was blowing the other way.

249 about had a heart attack when something slapped into the top of his helmet, jumping back half a pace in fright and spinning about. Nothing. Swallowing, he looked back around at the passage of enemy, but this time he got slapped on the shoulder, and he spun about faster, spiker rifles leveled.

"You okay?" 09 asked.

"What is that?" He asked, apprehensive. "What keeps hitting me?" Suddenly a thought occurred to him, and he looked up, expecting to see a Brute peering over the side of the building from the roof back at him. "Whatâ€|?" He asked, not seeing anything of the kind.

"Wow!" 09 jerked backwards, after seeing something spray from the top of his helmet after being slapped, too. "Oh, jeeze." He moaned. "It's _raining_."

"Ah." 249 chuckled, raising an arm to watch as another droplet slapped across the armor. "Some nerves, huh?"

"Some, nothing. Standing there staring down enemy forces and I get hit from behind by something I can't readily identify before I start getting jumpy because I can't see anything? Sure makes a fellow feel like a fool." 09 responded.

"I won't tell if you don't." 249 laughed. "Come on." He turned, and started through a ruined wall, the gaping wound in the ancient structure created by the orbital bombardment.

It didn't take long before the rain required both Spartans to start looking through an IR lens, as it became increasingly denser until it was impossible to see one's own hand unless one was directly beneath a spotlight. But said placement was far from desirable, making a change in light spectrums the only following option.

Arriving at a circular courtyard, the pair of Spartans came to a stop to survey the area and determine their next action. There was only one Brute, but though the fellow looked like he was dozing while standing upright, he wasn't the only Covenant member in the area. Grunts and Jackals swarmed around, under an array of light stands. A single spike through each support stem would darken the area, but it would also scatter the forces and make picking them off that much harder. Moving targets weren't so bad â€" panicked targets were unpredictable and often became quite bothersome.

A lot of ammo could be wasted on a berserk, panicked creature, as with the onset of the distress, no logical cognitive function could occur until calm reclaimed the brain â€" meaning no straight trajectories and often dodging both to and away from cover. The best way to outmatch one was either a bullethose or some form of hand-propelled explosive.

Unless one was an impossibly good shotâ€| and could compensate for the unpredictable as well as wind, distance droppage and armor

density. A headshot could become a clean miss all too quickly. 09 hit 249 on the shoulder before expressing an idea with hand signals, but 249 only shook his head.

A moment later, he shrugged, nodded, and leveled his spikers. No sense passing up an ammo depot even if most of this one was comprised of small arms. 09 grinned behind his visor, and took aim with his own weapon. At once fully half the lighting equipment was destroyed, but by the time any alarmed reaction could be enacted, the other half was blown out, too. Half a heartbeat later, the Spartans jumped into the fray of scattering Unggoy and Kig-yar, but just in case he had nightvision like the Sangheili did, 09 blasted the Brute first " with an entire magazine out of his Jiralhanae RPG.

Once he was down, 09 swiped his Carbine, and with the RPG over a shoulder, he began taking headshots out of the swarming crowd of smaller aliens that were clamoring for the exit they couldn't see. Return fire soon lit up the courtyard well enough, though, even as rain and plasma sizzled in protest of one another. 249 smacked a Jackal hard enough to flip it partway over, then kicked it before it was all the way down, breaking not only its skull but its ribs before letting it rest. Taking aim with his spike rifles again, he mowed down a posse of passing Grunts.

Spotting him, one lit up a pair of grenades and came running at him, howling madly as if stripped suddenly of sanity. With his spike rifles dry, though, and in the middle of trying to reload them both at once, 249 could only backpedal and hope the fuses on those grenades ran out before the spanse between him and the wall behind him did. He had just gotten the first mag seated and slammed it down into the cradle with a slap against his thigh when a round tore through the Grunt's head and toppled it sideways. A glance past the soon exploding creature told him 09 had taken that shot, the Brute's repossessed Carbine hard at work picking off Unggoy.

Seating the second magazine, 249 started forward again, firing anew. When a Jackal got too close, he slammed one of the guns down on its shoulder, the dual blade mounts at the barrel nearly slicing the neck clean. Taking the opportunity to reload, 09 saw another suicidal Grunt go tearing after the ever-moving 249, but this one was unable to keep up and popped in the middle of a group of his own. This cut their enemy down to

Both Spartans paused and turned when a fuel rod slammed hard into the wall past 249's head, as both knew neither held one of those launchers. Kig-yar and Unggoy alike plowed over their own fallen towards the source of that rod, squealing for salvation from the hell come down on them in the dark. 249 yelped and ducked into a sprint when the second fuel rod hit much closer to him, as he had no intention of testing that new shielding device the Mirratord had afforded him.

"249! Move to my position!" 09 called, exchanging a half-dry ammunition plug for a full one. Leveling his Carbine, he peered barrel first around the corner only to get bathed in bright lights. "Cripes!" He jumped back around the corner again even as it was sheared off in a shower of sparks and fragments under the impact of a third fuel rod.

From around the corner came the call of a Jiralhanae voice,

commanding fellows and the rush of dwindled reinforcements.

"Uh." 09 looked over to where 249 had landed when he'd stopped moving, but the other Spartan wasn't there. "What the?" He started, taking a scan of the courtyard. Nothing. "Oh, good." He growled, irritated that 249 had left him behind without saying anything.

His comm clicked on. "09, 09, copy?"

"Where are you?" He demanded.

"Shadow that. Get ready to peg some heads. I'm almost in position." 249 answered. "Readyâ€¦ now!"

Something exploded rather badly amid the ranks of enemy, but even as 09 turned partly around the corner and began to fire off rounds, he realized the front ranks were untouched â€" it was the rear flank that had been bombed, one of the Unggoy's methane tanks ripping into everything around it in a dazzling display of fire and shrapnel. For the attack, everyone had turned, though some only partly, as while distracted, those in the front rank were not convinced that what was in front of their advance was gone.

Return fire was light at first, but accurate, and 09 had to duck back around the corner to yield another launched fuel rod. This one crumbled the last of said corner, so now it was nicely rounded and a very poor source of cover. Brute calls became angry and frustrated at the detonation of another Grunt's air tank, so 09 used the spare moment of distraction to dart to the other side of the entryway, where the corner was still sharp and intact.

From there, he pegged another of the beasts, but ducked back around into hiding again before they responded â€" and he laughed aloud when the already ruined corner got punished again even though he wasn't behind it anymore. He hadn't realized he was that quick!

"249, you copy, over?" He called, checking his weapon.

"What's your status, 09?" Came the response.

"Low on ammunition. You?" 09 told him.

"Fair to good. I need you to swap to your heavy weapon and press the front rank. Get them to back up." 249 told him. "But just a little, so don't empty your magazine in case one of them charges you."

"Roger that." 09 tucked his Carbine over his shoulder as he pulled the Jiralhanae RPG over, checked the magazine content and spun around the corner to blast the first four rounds straight into the rank of Kig-yar guarding the lower half of the forward Brutes.

They flew in all directions in involuntary arcs, screaming and squalling, as the force of impact and explosion became more than they could withstand, the integrity of their arm shields aside. Completely unhurt, the row of Brutes behind them snarled at him, and all four of them put knuckles to flagstones and charged.

"Oh, crap!" 09 began to back up as fast as he dared to go, backwards, firing off the last of the magazine at the incoming Brutes. But that

was only three rounds, and he found himself in a similar position as 249 had been with the suicidal grunt earlier. "249! 249! I need backup _pronto!_"

"What? Now? Argh!" Came the response, even as the Spartan appeared down the same street the enemy had come from. Bending while still in motion, he swiped the dropped cannon from the paved street and brought it up with him as he straightened. "09, to the left, _now!_" He ordered, even as he braced the cannon against his shoulder and fired it at the racing Brute's backsides.

Taking queue, 09 stopped backing up and darted hard to the left, out into the middle of the courtyard, and away from the charging Brutes. And while they turned to follow, he had seen the launched rod flying before he'd even begun to move, so it struck the leftmost one before their motion was complete, and it threw all of them back.

Snarling now, the foursome picked themselves up and turned to see who had shot at them, only to catch a fast four more rounds in their collective faces, one for each. Bereft of heads, they toppled back at the behest of the impact forces, leaving little more than the rain to drum across the blood slicked flagstones.

"You intact, 09?" 249 asked, resting the cannon tipped back so he could rest his support hand at his side.

"Yesâ€|" 09 responded, picking himself up and shaking some of the more prominent water collections from the seams in his armor. "Find your niche?" He accused, motioning at the fuel rod cannon.

"What, this?" 249 asked, taking it from his shoulder and holding it up. "Naw, it was just handy in a pinch. Catch." He swung it once and let go, tossing the weapon underhanded at the other Spartan.

Catching it with a grunt, 09 looked at it. Now there were two weapons on his back, crisscrossed in an x pattern. "Got a question." He mentioned, taking it by the grip and letting it hang by his leg.

"Move first. Then ask." 249 said, turning and leading the way down their cleared passageway. "What's on your mind, 09?"

"I noticed the Sangheili call you Sol. Why is that?"

"I told them to." He answered, rounding the next corner only to bump into a Brute that hadn't been moving enough to show up on their motion trackers. Disturbed, the Brute started at them, then jumped away in surprise.

"Demons!"

****Scene Twelve **_**Eating Ants And Bullets**_**

Blood dribbled from his soaked armor, but he neither limped nor hesitated in his motions. The blood, and the injuries, were not his. Having left everyone behind an hour ago, The Lone Heretic had set out alone into the middle of the biggest concentration of enemy they had found thus far. Tearing them limb from limb and crushing their heads in a hand, maybe cutting one apart from time to time, he was culling

the deployment from the regiment all by himself.

Losing Aardvark had hurt, but he knew why she was gone " by fault of these enemy he now took his vengeance from. They would pay, all of them, for his pain. Killing just one or two amid the rest that his Mirratord brothers slew had only served to make him restless. The driving force behind this assault had to be found, and routed, and if he had to cut down the entire thing himself he would, just to get at it.

No one Brute, no one Jackal or Grunt could atone for the loss of his love, because it had not been they who had taken her from him. Fault, he supposed, lay with the heart of the command here.

A Prophet? Some Jiralhanae Chieftain Ship-Master? It didn't matter, only that he saw them die. His warrior's discipline kept him in time with his movements, but his rage, his pain, fueled his progress. Lone was beyond tired, exhausted after more than five hundred kills, over and through most of the western quadrant of the old city, but he just kept going, willing himself on, as if hoping to find Aardvark alive at the other side.

Logically, he knew he couldn't " you only get to die once. But she haunted him, a shade flitting from shadow to shadow and just out of sight, just out of reach. The rain was heavy enough it was often hard to tell what blurred shape represented what creature, but the way they all moved and the way they responded to his introduction to each scene made him sure beyond doubts that none were Aardvark, and none were Sangheili. It wasn't a race, but Lone kept himself moving quickly.

After watching the last Jiralhanae drop before his onslaught, Lone looked up, realizing for the first time he wasn't being rained on anymore. Much of the blood he'd been slicked with had washed off, but now it was merely rushing downwards with what moisture was still on him. Above him, high enough to disrupt the shape of the cloud cover yet low enough to keep from allowing any of the precipitation underneath it, the cruiser hung, a great purple monolith blotting out the sky.

His eyes narrowed. If he made it to the gravity lift, the ship would quickly change owners, or claim his life for the wont. He wasn't asking for death, but he knew he was only mortal, even with the technologies that protected the ranks of the Mirratord.

Taking the next street heading towards the aft of the vessel, he found himself at the center of a mass of snipers. Jackals, most likely, all pegging at his shielding at once. He sighed, and shook his head. Snipers were something one had to play cat and mouse with, even if one was more or less immune to their weaponry. Taking a fallen Carbine from the flagstones at his hooves, Lone raised the aim and began picking off the ones he could see. One by one, without hardly moving, he cleaned out most of the Jackals, but when he found a Jiralhanae face behind one beam rifle scope, he smiled weirdly at him before firing a quick succession of the last of the magazine into the creature's face.

Resuming his walk, the Councilor let the empty Carbine fall at his side, clattering to the stones to be left behind as he walked away. He didn't need a weapon to be dangerous, didn't need shielding to be

hard to take down. Sometimes he would deactivate the one and leave the other on his belt when he fought, but right now he didn't care enough to 'even the odds' for anyone â€" this was not for honor. It was for the fallen, and there was no such thing as fair if he had to lose the only thing that truly and really mattered.

Coming upon a large block of the city that had been leveled by the bombardment, he ran his eyes over the remains of more than a thousand dead and decapitated. Puzzled, he stood still just surveying the damage from where he had come out of the old city.

Many were in fleeing sprawls, others in relaxed balled up poses, all of them shredded more than sliced down, but there was no sign of any enemy save if they had been fighting one another â€" but that theory didn't fit, as even Brutes had fallen, while in retreat. While known to back off from a foe now and again, no Brute ever turned his back to outright abandon the sight of his enemy. Theseâ€¦ nearly all of theseâ€¦ had. It left the Councilor with only one relevant question to ask;

What had happened here?

****Scene Thirteen **_**A Flood of Implications**_**

"Fall back!!" The sound of the Imperial Admiral's voice overshot all the roaring, screaming and explosions of grenades, trip-mines and sizzling, slamming fuel rods and rockets. "Get out of there, EK!" He called, clawing a Brute from his side and slamming a fist into its face to knock it back. Bringing up his swords, he sliced the head free, then pushed the body back, only to be swamped by another three.

"Admiral, get down!" Warbirds called, slashing and clawing to close the gap. There were so many people cramming into the space they were in, all hacking, beating, clawing to own the territory it was impossible not to be knocked flat and then stomped to death. Most of the enemy were Jiralhanae, but on occasion there would be a Kig-yar introduced to the crush, and soon that was all it was â€" crushed.

Too small and too slight to bear the slamming and pushing of the bigger creatures around them, the Jackals that got into the fray were soon doing little more than carpeting the battle effort. Having come out of practically nowhere, the enormous swell of Brute ranks had caught everyone by surprise, even the ever-sensitive, ever-attentive Kuro. The crowd had simply been moving too fast and across the wrong terrain to have seen coming.

"Warbirds!" Someone yelled. "Warbirds!" No reply, but Aozora heard one of his Strike Team cry in pain, right as another's shielding finally gave an overzealous pop and gave up. The warrior's response to this was nil â€" nothing had changed spare now it was only his wit and his armor between him and the pressing swarm of Brutes.

"They're getting past us!" DINGO's unmistakable bass boomed, above the din. "Someone get a grenade in that doorway!"

"I can't reach!" Evilkitty called back, elbowing the Brute in the throat that was dominating most of her view with the inside of his mouth. "Kuro! Where are you!"

"Here!" Came the reply, satisfying Evilkitty that she had not, in fact, been smashed to the flagstones and trod upon once there. It was hard to keep track of everyone, or even one's kills, or even if one had any at all. A fist impacted Evilkitty's armored vest, and the Brutes behind her snarled when she was shoved against them, but they had kept her upright. Afforded the slightest area of elbowroom, she brought both swords up at once, and sliced the offending party in thirds lengthwise from the waist up. Screaming more for her frustration than anything else, she managed to saw her way through the crowd to find where the smaller female had been pressed to, opening the area around Kuro only to be smashed to the cobbled ground when she hesitated her cutting upon arrival.

Her cry from there became more a wail of protest and pain, but as much as she clawed and slashed with her swords, there was never the same Brute twice trodding upon her. Kuro, seizing the opportunity granted by the gap Evilkitty had made, kept her airspace open for as long as she could, carving thrashing Brutes down and up whenever they came in reach, right up until one came back with the butt end of an RPG, and knocked her slight frame aside.

Having seen the two females go down practically on top of one another, Aozora spot-hopped using the integrated technologies embedded in his armor so he wouldn't have to fight with the push and crush of Brutes. When he rematerialized between the girls, though, the shouldering pack around him practically disintegrated in his anti-matter stream, leaving a hole in the ranks as broad as his outstretched arms. For his trouble, though, a number of the Brutes behind the ones now missing most of their anatomies shoved the partial carcasses away and showered him in a blinding score of munitions "frustrating his intentions because now he could see nothing at all past his glowing, protesting shielding, even if he wasn't physically bothered by the assault.

Forced to grope blindly, he found Evilkitty first, who used her memory of situational placement between the three of them to find Kuro straightaway. Picking her up, Evilkitty pressed her weapons back into her hands, right before Aozora shut down his shield generator in favor of being able to see again.

Granted that, he dove back into the fray, cutting aside weaponry, arms, and finally, things more vital. To his flanks, the girls met with similar abandon. Carving down and sideways, Aozora watched as the Brute fell back, and started at it, surprised. Dead lay scattered everywhere, the ones masked up till then by the passage of traffic. But just that it had had the room to actually _fall_!

Sparing his surroundings a look, he shut off his swords and hooked them on his belt, puzzled. "What just happened?"

"Ugh." DLNG0 responded, pushing a dead carcass off him before rising and scraping off the separate chunks. "I'm not real sure, and not real sure I want to know, either. That was damned odd."

"Head count." Aozora said, suddenly. "Is everyone intact? I know I heard someone complaining!"

"Here, Admiral." Soulshadow responded, pressing from the wall to everyone's far right, where he had been scraped to. "I don't see!"

he swung his head back and forth, scanning the scene. "â€| does anyone see Warbirds?"

"Warbirds!" Aozora plunged forward, throwing cut carcasses aside as he sought to unbury his friendâ€| but it wasn't that he'd fallen. He simply wasn't there. All eyes turned to the street the enemy had retreated down. "They must have taken himâ€|"

"Why?" D1NG0 asked. "Why him and not you? Why not all of us, if that?" He kicked a body away from him, then rested a hoof on it and a hand on that knee. "None of this is making much sense to me, Admiral. Something tells me we have a bit more to worry about than being routedâ€|"

"Aozora!" Kuro suddenly cried, grabbing everyone's attention with the urgency in her tone. He turned to face her, but she wasn't looking at him, her head tipped to one side the way a prey animal's might be if it thought it had scented a predator. "Something is not rightâ€|"

"Wasn't I just saying as much?" D1NG0 complained, crossing his arms against the fact that no one was paying him any mind.

"What do you think it is, Kuro?" Aozora asked.

"Iâ€| the way those Jiralhanae were moving. It wasn't an attack on our position. They were running from something. Scared. Terrified. Like it was some unstoppable horrorâ€|" She paused, and her eyes widened as logical conclusion kicked in.

Everyone chorused the last two words together; "Like Flood."

"But Admiral, there is no Flood on this moon." D1NG0 put in.

"Wouldn't we have noticed something like Flood being here by now?" Evilkitty asked, crossing her arms and cocking her hips to ease her weight distribution from her most sore leg. Being trampled under a stampeding herd of wild-eyed Brutes had not been her best day ever.

"I have no idea!" Aozora protested, before Soulshadowman had a chance to say anything similar to the other two.

"I don't smell anything that resembles Flood smell." Kuro offered. "But I know what fear smells like, and you don't go scaring a whole contingent of Brutes unless you're something a lot like Flood."

"What if it really is Flood? What has it been eating? And how did it get here, get woke up, and get fed enough to make itself a nuisance?" Evilkitty asked.

"Could have come with the Covenant." Soulshadow offered, tentative.

Aozora looked at him, then at the rest of them. "Well. That sure made my day." His tone was far from jovial, but the sentiment was shared.

****Scene Fourteen **_**Coulda' Woulda' Shoulda'**_**

Light was streaming through his eyelids. It was too bright, focused on his face, and it hurt. Among other things.

It seemed his whole person had been sent through a meat grinder, slapped into patty shape and then fried in boiling oil. At least, that was how it all feltâ€| beginning to crack his eyes open, he realized the light, while directly overhead, was not deliberately pointed at him, but rather he at it, making the other, identical lights in the ceiling seem moot.

Warbirds squeezed his eyes shut and rolled his head to one side, weary. Whatever he'd been hit with, he didn't want to do that again, but for the moment, how he had come to his current whereabouts was a more pressing matter to him. Reopening his eyes he tried to focus on something, but it all remained very fuzzy. Nothing was terribly indistinct, but it was hardly sharply defined, eitherâ€| the hominid shaped brown fuzzies milling about near what he assumed was a door â€" activation lights toggling on and off in sequenced patterns every time someone stepped too near or sought to pass â€" were likely Brutes.

Tasting his mouth, Warbirds squinted at the scene, trying to make it clear up. Blinking wasn't helping any at all. He inhaled deeply, and let the breath go nearly all at once, only after realizing his mistake â€" one of the Brutes heard his breath and quickly turned to see him, before closing the gap between them and greeting the groggy warrior with a hard right hook.

Warbirds came to realize most of the restraints that held him when the laws of physics sent him back from the impact of the blow, noting the placement of each one and counting how many almost as a matter of course. The throbbing addition to his woes on the side of his head was noted last â€" even as he brought his head back again to look straight at the Brute.

"You filthy Sangheili scum. Proud warrior brought to his knees! Look at you â€" nothing better than a lowly Grunt, sniveling on the floor for mercy you won't get!" As if in need of some form of emphasis, the Brute kicked a nearby Unggoy so it tumbled across the floor to bang against the far wall before picking itself up and leaving in an understandable hurry. Most of its comrades did the same, save the ones that dared not for fear of being chased down by the Brutes scattered throughout the room.

Warbirds squinted oddly at the Brute, wondering first why he was alive, then how he'd gotten this far without realizing it. Shouldn't he _remember_ something as profound as capture? But that was blurry, too â€" all he knew prior to the black of unconsciousness had been being overrun by way too many enemy all at once in a way too narrow street. He remembered seeing the Imperial Admiral disappearâ€| temporal fold, likely. It seemed an odd time to employ the suit function, but then the Admiral liked to be resourceful, not explanatory. It had likely been because of the same thing he himself had seen just a moment before. Kuro going under and getting trampled.

He doubted she was dead, or even more hurt than a couple of bruises. But himselfâ€| he seemed in a mite more trouble than he was used to.

The Brute turned away from him for just a second, long enough to take something from another Brute, then used his turning momentum to ram the item against Warbirds's and it turned out to be an electromagnetic amperage generator, also known as an EMAG or better known as a shock stick.

Word was the things hurt like hell. Word was vastly outdated and understated, especially when magnetism was obtained inside one's chest cavity. The only thing Warbirds could do was scream, but it came out as a strangled gargle, all the muscles in his chest and neck involuntarily pulling tight all at once and constricting vocal ability.

The Brute yanked the shock stick free with the trigger stud still depressed, so a large white electric arc popped loudly outside his skin after the wicked looking contact poles reentered atmosphere. Some of him twitching, other parts sagging in relief, Warbirds gasped past watering eyes, aware his vision had more or less cleared but thinking that the price for it had been unusually high. The Brute snarled something at him, but he wasn't listening to that abominable creature, and when he didn't answer, he was stabbed with the EMAG again, and lit up from the inside.

Having only just inhaled prior to that, this time he was able to actually scream instead of choke on his own larynx, but he ran out of air long before the Brute decided to pull the shock stick free this time. Turning away, it paced in a circle, coming back on his other side. Waving the bloody contact poles in Warbird's face, the Brute spoke to him again.

Hardly coherent from the enormous electrical overload, Warbirds still didn't hear him, and still didn't answer. This time, all he got was punched, though, rattling his teeth and compressing one eye into its socket. The feeling could hardly be construed as pain when everything else hurt far worse, but it was an alarming arousal to the situation. Shaking his head in an attempt to clear it, Warbirds blinked dazedly at the Brute doing the torturing. He was snarling back, the low growl emitting from his throat causing the fur on the outside to vibrate. Inhaling once, he focused on the Brute's narrowed, hateful eyes.

"You shouldn't have done that." He rasped, quietly.

The Brute started to laugh, turning to look at the rest of his kind that were in the room as he did so, as they began to laugh with him. Some of them, Warbirds was sure, had been too far away to have heard his muted comment. But they laughed anyway, as if just enjoying that one of their own was having some fun at a Sangheili's expense. What none of them realized until it was too late to react was that none of them would be walking from this room alive.

The Brute holding the EMAG turned to face Warbirds again, shock stick poised for action, but his motions froze in shock and awe when he witnessed the battered warrior literally peeling the restraints from their anchors, coming off the flat he'd been tied to as if not withheld at all. Lunging, Warbirds seized the EMAG straight out of the Brute's grasp, twirled it around and stabbed him with it, hitting the stud once it had broken skin. Unrestrained, the Brute did a strange jig while howling in agony, the foreign electrical charge causing his nerves to misfire and his muscles to spasm.

Yanking the device free of the falling enemy, Warbirds spun on a hoof and launched at the next nearest, an electric arc snapping in the air before him, at the end of a wicked looking staff. Contact poles made landfall during a downward sweep of the device while Warbirds jumped at his next victim, and it electrified the floor for a brief second and a half. The result became the enraged warrior coming down on a Brute that had already fallen from its feet.

The beast reached up and caught him, but he slammed a fist into one elbow, breaking it, and tore free of the other arm before threading the EMAG through the Brute's throat. He left it there, leaving the Brute to strangle on the metal rod in its neck. By the time he met the second Brute, most of them had gotten back up, and were beginning to bring weaponry to bear. Having any at all in the room with him had been a mistake, as it gave him munitions to work with, and little else.

Snapping the second Brute's head around so its neck broke, Warbirds spun on a hoof and swiped the DER-55 from its falling grasp. Pasting the front rank of assembled enemy, Warbirds earned the time he needed to close the gap and actually inflict some real damage. To his left, he saw the door's indicator lights flash, signaling that it was about to slide open, right before he connected with his third target and tore into it.

The Brute howled in pain, but was relieved of his tormentor briefly when a comrade snatched Warbirds from his intended victim. All it really did was forestall the warrior from killing his target very soon, as he turned in the next one's grasp and attacked anew. Slamming an elbow into the Brute's face, he was freed of it's grasp, and practically given the RPG in its hands as it staggered backwards from the power of the blow delivered to its head. Dizzily, the Brute grabbed a fellow to steady itself, but right as it had its eyes straightened and could focus, it looked up only in time to witness its own stolen weapon coming down on its head, blade first.

Warbirds fired a round from the RPG into one Brute that sought to evade his onslaught, but though staggered, it did get away when a closer one redirected Warbird's attention for a moment.

Something metal screamed in tortured agony as it tore, and the gravity on the deck jumped and shifted wildly, stopping the fight before it could finish. Warbirds jumped back to his hooves, though, always one to be quick to react, and surveyed the room for what had caused that odd anomaly. His darkened expression turned surprised when his gaze lit on an armored, shielded, hammer-toting Brute.

Ahâ€| the one that had just come in. Warbirds smiled wickedly at the creature, dropping the RPG to one side as Brutes on all sides scrambled away. He always had loved a good challengeâ€|

****Scene Fifteen **_**Throes of Scientific Suicide**_**

There was a window, surprise, surprise. Every inch of wallspace was taken up by cabinetry or shelving, with one stretch reserved for deep freezing and refrigeration for things like nitrogenâ€| at those temperatures it would be ice, rather than gas. Walking along in front of one shelf, Flyer was trying to read off the labels without his

head exploding. Chemical compounds both stable and volatile, bizarre and common, as well as a few isolated elements here and there. All in all, the bio end of the lab " there was a technological end " was as creepy as it was overstocked.

Flyer shook his head and turned to look at a few chemically uninteresting things " the people, for starters " before his befuddled mind was completely ruined. "Hey, Acetyl. Where'd you get half this stuff?"

"Here and there. Some of it was traded for, some of it was purchased, some of it I extracted or captured myself." Came the half-distracted reply. "Hey." He looked up from his item-cluttered desktop. "I'm missing the hyper electro-injection distillers. Does anyone see a small bin full of what look like spiked marbles?"

"Well, that was the least informative I've ever known this guy to be." Maestro commented, turning from watching Acetylcholine to look for the so described objects.

"How big is a small bin, and how big are the marbles?"

"About the size of the end of your thumb." Acetyl remarked, pulling over a magnifying lens and looking through it at something on his desk. "Remarkable."

"What is?" Flyer asked, picking up a hard square box made from a poly-resin compound and looking in. Seeing what resembled a mess of detached morning stars inside, he closed the gap between himself and the scientist with it in hand.

"Ah! Thank you." Acetyl took them, looking at something else, before plucking a data pad from under something that looked like it ought to have been heavier than that. He ran his eyes over the data scrolling across the pad, then let it drop on the top of the stack it had been under. Looking into the poly-resin bin Flyer had procured, he frowned at the contents before selecting one of the little spiked spheres and setting the rest aside.

"About how long is this little venture of yours going to take, Ace?" Maestro asked, from the door.

"Maybe a couple of hours, if it doesn't blow up prematurely once or twice. Why, was there something else you wanted an opportune moment to mention?"

Maestro gave him a disgusted look. "No" just some nearby enemy movement, that's all."

Flyer sighed. "No rest, no rest."

"Only for the wicked." Tejan mentioned, under his breath.

"What kind of enemy movement are we talking about, Maestro?" Flyer asked, stepping over to his position. Maestro moved aside to allow Flyer to look out and see for himself. Down the hall, barely half of just one Brute could be seen, moving this way and that, as if trying to choose between hallways that had forked.

"Someone made some friends getting here, I see." Maestro mentioned,

crossing his arms at Flyer.

"Well it wasn't me." Came the response. "I was just along for the ride." Flyer turned from the scene when the Brute disappeared behind the corner that had already been partially masking it, and looked over the faces in the room with him. Maestro, his expression accusing, looking back, Tejan in the corner, expressionless and nonchalant as if having expected more. Acetyl, behind the heap on the far desk, assembling or pretending to assemble something. And then there was the other two, quietly talking between themselves.

He sighed. It would have to do " while he knew Maestro had done some field work, his own expertise in the field revolved around flying through furballs in aerial combat, not necessarily hand-to-hand like a number of the other members of the Mirratord preferred.

He'd even heard one or two of the Councilors didn't bother to use shielding or their swords. It was all madness, to him, but then he also knew better than to challenge one of said Council members to a duel, either. Taking a deep breath, he glanced at Maestro, and asked, "So who wants to do some deep recon?"

"You're good at not getting killed in overwhelming situations, why are you looking at me? Why don't you go?" Maestro accused.

"Maestro." Flyer sighed, frowning at him. "Did you wake on the wrong side of the bed this morn?"

"Just get out there and make a sweep of the situation." Maestro shoved him out the door, forcing him to frantically activate his camouflage engine on the fly. With a frustrated, dejected sigh, Flyer made his way back down the hall he'd only just come up through, towards the tailing squadron of Brutes. He found an Unggoy first, the little Grunt sniffing about despite having a methane mask to smell through, and after spotting all of his pack mates, Flyer came across two Brutes and a Jackal pair. Nothing they couldn't handle" probing further, Flyer slipped carefully between the troops and spanned the gap down the next hall up.

He froze first, backpedaling in too much of a hurry to be quiet about it at the end of that hall, trying to outdistance a Hunter pair. Hunters! Of all the creatures, why had they brought Hunters to rout a few straggling Mirratord and one crazed scientist? The whole world had suddenly gone mad!

His fortune ran dry at the corner ahead, where one of the Brutes stepped up practically to meet him, leaving little room for negotiation when he bumped right into the fellow. The Brute gave a startled snort, and stepped back, averting his eyes from the approaching Lekgolo, but before Flyer could recapture his balance and trajectory, the Brute clamped a hand around his throat and held him in place.

"Sangheili!" He snarled, slapping a spiker from his belt and cramming it into Flyer's throat below his fist " and slamming him against a wall. Looking at the Hunters, who both had paused their advance to hunker with their cannons and shields forward, he snarled unappreciatively at them. "You should know better than to play with

your prey before you kill it! These are Mirrator'd, not meager Elites!"

Flyer felt condemned and honored all at once â€" caught, and then riddled with accolade. What were the odds? Prying at the grip on his slowly constricting throat was proving futile, but he couldn't recall how many seconds he had once his air was completely cut off. Seven? Fifteen? Twelve? Four? His thoughts deranged and scattered when he heard the firing stud on the spike rifle depress with an audible click. For some reason he also heard the firing mechanism inside the gun pop and crackle independent of the high whine of munitions departure from the barrel. The Brute's snarling face seemed to be slowly turning to the left, but at an odd angle.

Desperate not to be mauled and murdered, Flyer slammed a fist into the side of the gun, and sent the rounds wild. Time snapped back to a more reasonable pace, and most of the Brute followed the roundward trajectory of his way-flung gun, loosening the grasp on Flyer's throat. Sending an uppercut into that elbow, the Brute's hand came free, slapping into Flyer's mandibles and making him bite himself as his head rocked back, but he was free â€" and in the middle of a sudden artillery range!

Darting from the Brute, who was soon to die if he didn't flee too, Flyer made for the Brute's squadron, plowing through them even as they turned to witness the thunderous impact of the munitions from the Hunter's cannons. The Brute, miraculously still alive after suffering a direct hit from both, came flailing after him, emitting a pain-crazed howl that sent chills through Flyer's veins. Hitting the second Brute with a shoulder, he sent the creature against the wall, which off-balanced it enough to drop it to one knee, and hopped right over the head of a hunkering Grunt to pass that one too.

Taking the immediate right hook into the door of the room Acetylcholine had modified into a laboratory, he slammed unceremoniously into the closed door. Recoiling with both hands on his suddenly sore face, Flyer looked up in time to see the Brutes rallying their meager forces against the Hunters, having mistakenly assumed the pair had assaulted the first Brute and tried to kill it â€" but at least the fight was between them and didn't include Flyerâ€" returning to the door, he bullied it open, then kicked it so it slammed closed behind him.

Acetyl looked up at the sudden noise of entrance. "Well, nothing's getting _that_ door open any time soon." He sighed.

Flyer turned his glare at Maestro even as the walls rattled for the nearby explosion of grenades and impact trauma inflicted into the walls and surrounding structure by the Hunters and their cannons. "You filthy wretch!" He accused, stalking across the floor towards the other warrior.

For some reason, Maestro didn't seem the least bit phased. "Excuse me?" he asked, mildly.

"You knew that would happen, didn't you!" Flyer hit Maestro's armored vest with a fist, one accusing, pointing finger extended. "You knew I was only going to stir up trouble and you pushed me out there anyway! How could you!?"

"You needed the experience." Maestro shrugged.

"Experience!! If the enemy gains possession of this lab we could _all_ go up! There's enough volatile substances just on _that wall_ alone to flatten a quarter of the city!" Flyer exclaimed. "We need to use caution, not training drills! You so much as lightly _bump_ some of those things and they go boom."

Acetyl watched the exchange from behind his heaped up desks, wondering if now would be a bad time to mention that the substances of mention had all been locked in an anti-grav cable emitter vault on the _other_ side of the room. To his credit, though, he did keep his mouth shut, letting Flyer have his momentâ€¦ the fight seemed more or less diffused anyway, as Maestro refused to rise to the bait and strolled idly away, running his eyes over the shelves of phials and canisters while Flyer went to fume quietly in a corner and hope the Hunters didn't go looking for where he had disappeared to.

Everyone looked up when the crunched door popped right out of the frame and landed on the floor with a bang. Hunched, the lone Hunter looked peeved indeed, smeared with the blood of all the rest of the squadron as well as that of its bond-brother.

"Oh, good." Acetyl moaned.

****Scene Sixteen **_**Plan B **_**

Spartan Sol 249 stood where he perceived that he was aloneâ€¦ save the company of the other Spartan, 09. It was just one carcass, but it wasn't enemy. This unfortunate soul had been Sangheili once, rendered now to the point that it seemed there was little more than the armor to define what it had once been.

A sickly, olive-green complexion covered the majority of the carcass, with disfigured, deformed and malformed extensions and growths masking a once streamlined body â€" who it had been was still in question, as there was no insignia and no recognizable face to discernâ€¦ not that 249 had had any exceptional ability to tell Sangheili faces apart in the first place.

09 stepped up beside him, having crested the last step of the stair they had taken to get to where they now stood. He paused. "249, is thatâ€¦?" He began.

"Yeah." 249 answered, sadly. "Yeah, it is."

The fallen Flood combat form before them was testament to what they could expect ahead â€" and it also explained why they had begun to see enemy that didn't need killing for the simple fact that they had all already been slain. Why the bodies had not been taken as hosts and transformed to the infection's tastes mentioned only that the population of infection forms was fairly small as of currently. It gave a ray of hope that the Mirrator'd might just escape the moon without tracesâ€¦ Flood tended to redecorate whenever they got the chance to.

"Poor bastard." 09 mentioned. "Do you know who it used to be?"

"Not a clue. I'd need to ask." 249 replied. "Come on, we still have ground to coverâ€¦"

"Spartans!" Both men turned at the shout, rifles leveled, but both lowered their weapons almost simultaneously when they recognized who and what they were looking at.

"Sir— wait, where are the rest of you? I thought your Strike Team was much larger." 09 greeted, sounding puzzled.

"Misfortune graces us this night. Is this all, with you?" The Imperial Admiral responded. "How many did you set out with?"

"Just us two, sir." 249 answered. "So far resistance has been minimal when it wasn't already killed by— Flood, sir."

"Flood? You've confirmed Flood presence, then?"

The Spartans both took a side step, one to the left, the other to the right, leaving the Elite-Flood combat form behind them in plain view to the warrior before them. Aozora's expression tightened as his gaze fell to it.

"By the gods—" He muttered.

Evilkitty stepped up at his elbow on one side as Soulshadow appeared on the other, the trailing remnants of the once-proud Strike Team forming up behind their leader. One by one their active camouflages auto-shut off, leaving them visible in the chill night air.

Spartan 249 spared a glance up, noting the thinning of the density of the rain that was rinsing the streets, and wondered if the storm had all but passed. "What are your orders, Admiral?" He asked.

Aozora turned away from the Flood form. "We find the source of this outbreak, and we destroy it. Everything else can and must wait. If we are lucky, the Covenant troops will aid in this endeavor, at least until we outnumber the Flood once more."

"Yes, sir." 249 responded. "09 and I were heading north, through the old Mains towards that cruiser holding position over the city. We had hoped to stop by the Armory before we—"

Aozora raised a hand, cutting him short. "There is nothing left of the Armory, Spartan. It was near to emptied when the siege began, and then shortly after it was flattened under the bombardment."

"—yes, sir. Do— we go ahead with the original plan, then, sir?"

"I can conceive of no other place to look for the seeds of this plague than on those ships— so yes. We will enter the transports of our enemies, and we will rout this infection at its heart."

"Yes, sir." The Spartans chorused.

****Scene Seventeen **_**Reflections**_**

Lone leaned against the decorative piling's remnant, the top half long ago collapsed from its place, while those of its brothers had all been shot off at eye level much more recently. The age of the injury rendered in the stone had been like a mirror, reflecting to

the Councilor that at times, depending on what one made of one's situation, old wounds never heal.

He hated to become bitter for Aardvark's loss, hated that he'd been dwelling on the pain it brought him rather than the cherished memories between themâ€| but with so many of the enemy responsible for her death around him it was decidedly hard not to. He'd been over much of the old city now, parts of it through uncontested passage and at one point, not even footprints of prior passage by others.

During their stay, the Mirrator had kept the city more or less clean, but there were still parts that got dusty, dirty, overgrown and even buried under a layer of dirt thick enough to support plant life. Tiny plants with soft, fuzzy leaves brushed against the armored boots he wore over his hooves as he passed, the one-inch tall vegetation more or less equal to the one-inch depth or so of soil it had to work with. In places, the dirt had been scraped away, usually by walking on it or runningâ€| or clawing at it to regain one's footing.

Here, more dead had gathered, but here also there was an unmistakable scent of an enemy no one had ever been allies with before. This was the sole enemy that had always been the enemy, never anything less or more. He sighed, waving at the green fog pouring from a number of the more badly rotted carcasses. They weren't spores so much, as really thick bad airâ€| with the controlling infection forms inside them either dead or gone, the modified bodies strewn amid the unmodified dead had really begun their path down the road of total decomposition. They had plans to become more of that soil they were laying on.

Because of this, the smell here was next to incredible â€" and even as he kept going, Lone wondered if he would make it to the next pocket of breathable air before he passed out for the lack thereof.

Treading past the southern edge of the battle he'd missed, Lone came upon just that â€" fresh, clean air washed through the streets to greet him, blowing up from the thermals generated by the cliff faces leading to a sharp, deep canyon on the southern edge of the city. Rumor had it there was a small, snaking river at the bottom of that gorge, but Lone had never had the time to go see if that was true. Even if it was, the water wasn't liable to be more than two feet deep at best. Jumping was completely out of the question.

Still, it generated a wind funnel, and the currents that escaped over the top edge of the cliffs made for a nice exchange of air in that part of the city. Breathing deep, Lone took a left.

Down through a vine encrusted archway and past an area that was busted and bowl shaped, the Councilor paused to see the layout. Where he was now he hadn't been in a short while, but the last time, Aardvark had been with him. He closed his eyes, wishing he couldn't see her around every stinking corner, but here, attributed to the memory, the picture was stronger. Shirking her duties temporarily to see him before he had had to leave, this had been where they had met prior to his departure.

Her smile, her laugh, had once given him hope, strength, courage. Now they only haunted him, reminded him that she wasn't there anymore.

Shaking his head, he walked on. Through this corridor, down a flight of narrow stairs that wound almost gracefully around the side of a building, to street level again, he stopped when he noted that the next step to be taken was no longer there.

Here, the underground had collapsed. Part of one of the passages was open to be peered down into, but though the passages under the city were plenty big, this one had been near to completely blocked off by sections of stone and tons of dirt. Unburying it would not be worth the trouble, not that anyone would have time to do such a thing anyway. At the bottom, despite the wind, parts of the collapse had been stirred. Part of one Brute, a whole of the other, both unquestionably crushed and dead, despite having nothing on them to perform said action.

Sliding carefully down the side of the hollow, Lone walked across the bottom, noting a few hoof tracks beneath the mad scuffle of Brute tracks. A Sangheili had either survived the fall and walked away before more enemy arrived and investigated, or one had slid down after the fact much like he had, to survey for survivors.

His gaze turned to a sprinkling of armor fragments standing in the dirt between bricks and rocks where a great impression of a stone that now stood upright against one side of the hole was. Curious, he squatted to see closer in the poor light, and his fingers traced the outline of several fractured lines through an otherwise perfect imprint of a Sangheili's battle dress. But it was someone slightâ€”none of the great males he had known had lain here â€” the length and breadth of the impression was simply too small.

Picking a fragment of the armor from the dirt, he flipped it over between his fingers, investigating its nature. Deciding it had come from a standard Mirrator'd grade gauntlet, he picked a few others from the dirt and matched their sides until he had a ragtag zigzag of armor before him. But the bitterness of loss only amplified when he recognized that this gauntlet could only have belonged to a definite one out of the many warriors to choose from.

There was scrollwork embossed in the metal.

Lone stood straight, trying to force the path the missing body had taken upon leaving from the tortured soil at his feet, but it still took many minutes for him to distinguish the faint imprints of little hooves between rocks that left no traces and the dirt that did. A sound brought his gaze up, and he found himself looking at the surface edge of the collapse right as a bulbous Flood infection form topped the edge, and waved at him with its extended antennae.

A new rage flooded him; if he had to not only suffer her loss but be forced to cut her reanimated body down, there was no mistaking what would be left of the once compassionate Councilor. Striking his swords from his belt with a snarl audible for blocks, Lone launched at the form, breaking it into fragments to match the gauntlet Aardvark had broken. The edge crested, Lone found himself facing a virtual horde of Flood combat forms now, all but one of them Jiralhanae.

Lone focused on the single Sangheili combat form, trying to distinguish if that was what remained of his love, but he only had a heartbeat's span to look before the crowd dove at him, gurgling

incoherently and lusting for blood. His responding cry was wrought more of tortured agony than anger, even as he sliced and beat the Flood forms down, often three or more at a time, expressing his torment to all concerned in the only way he knew how. Suffering that Aardvark's fallen body would be disgraced and dishonored by some uncaring Flood infection was beyond what he was willing to swallow. He'd had enough; and he was going to murder them all.

Despite the Flood's usual tendency to move in packs of thousands and millions, this group proved too small for such a number, and equally too small to sate Lone's raised ire before they all had been shredded. Kneeling in the middle of the mess, he lifted a section of the armored vest the Elite Flood form had worn, and wiped it off to see if it was embossed at all.

He found himself sickened that he recognized the scoring marks on it, thus recognizing who it once had been, but relieved in that it was not, indeed, Aardvark robbed from the grave and come back again. Letting it drop, he muttered a prayer for the warrior that the Flood had killed, and looked away from the evidence. To be turned to Flood seemed fitting for the Brutes, after what they had done to his people, but it was still a wretched mess—he lowered his head, and closed his eyes, refusing to look at it all.

Holding a fragmented memory in his hands, Lone spent a few minutes in reflection, recalling where he had first found the lady Aardvark, how they had met. One of the Spartans had found her out in the colonies of since glassed and abandoned sectors, and had brought her in — assassin, bard and all. She had been immediately enamored by the Imperial Admiral's charm, although even at a glance it was obvious she had no interest in him as a mate. After meeting with and speaking to Kuro, who at the time had not yet wed him, the sentiment proved all the more solid.

Yet even as she weighed and measured those around her, Aardvark had remained stolidly distant—he as though biding her time, gaining a feel for the environment. She spent a lot of her time in the Archives, reading up on Mirratorid histories, talking to the Council and the then-Strike Team, moving between the ranks and memorizing faces.

It had been a bit odd to some of the other members, how she had completely ignored those of her own standing in favor of speaking with the upper echelons. Her induction to the Strike Team came unexpected to her, a double query from both himself and the Admiral. She had settled in well enough, but despite everyone else's faith in her ability, the aspiring female had then promptly requested that she be overlooked when the next round of promotions flew through — in fact, she had asked that her rank be chiseled in stone. Not many had refused so solidly to climb the ladder.

He remembered walking into the Amphitheater one day while feeling rather down and coming in contact with the angelic echo that was Aardvark singing—he it had taken the Mirratorid a while to realize she sang — for the express reason that she had hidden the talent from everyone. Spotting him standing there had shut her up inside an instant, as well, but from then on he had felt something else about her.

It had been a long time since then—he and braver, she had begun to

sing in spite of anyone listening in or watching, but now the echo of her song had long since faded from the resonant walls of the Amphitheater, and would never be heard there again. If possessed of no other quality, it could be said that Aardvark had been unique.

With a tired sigh, Lone pulled himself to his hooves, and walked slowly away. There was nothing here to keep him, and doubtless more enemy needing attending out there somewhere.

****Scene Eighteen **_**Like Playing Tetris**_**

He'd been a hard sell.

Warbirds grimaced for the brief flare of pain in his side, but the resonant whang of the gravity hammer hitting the deck had carried over several corridors and chambers. Between them, the Mirrator warrior and the Jiralhanae Chieftain-Ship Master had flattened more than a few walls, crumpled at least one docked dropship, and killed more than half the crew onboard. Deployment of ground forces had been stalled altogether as the Brutes all tried to rally and depose the threat to their ship.

Warbirds watched as the armored Brute's body drooped, slowly sagging down as his twitching muscles relaxed. He'd been the first worthy opponent to face the Zealot in a while, but even though now Warbirds was more than a little wounded, the Chieftain was out of the way and the odds of him running into another like him any time soon were very slim. The remaining crew and couple of ground teams left aboard after their collaterally damaging fight would be easy pickings.

He turned from the scene in silence, going now after where he'd seen that they had stashed his armor â€" since he was wounded he knew he would need it, adding also that he had no desire to leave it here when he returned to the Mirrator he'd been snatched from below the ship.

After arriving at the scene and getting most of his armor back on, Warbirds was hit by an epiphany â€" why not just clean out the ship and bring the Mirrator up onto it, instead? He shook his head, with a resigned sigh. No, he wasn't that stupid. He would want some comrades to help with that. Settling the last greave, he stomped his hooves to settle the whole thing, and then turned from the place, to see about commandeering the ship controls, so he could just seal everyone in place and then worry about finding a way to communicate with his brothers.

One look at his personal communications unit told him there was no way that that signal was going to penetrate the hull. He would need to gain the command deck to rout the signal through the ship comms, but that didn't change his first plan by much â€" take the bridge, or take the bridge. What, really, was the difference? Grinning at his significant lack of available plans, Warbirds headed for the nearest passage to the command deck.

Either way, he was going to hand the Imperial Admiral a New Covenant cruiser on a silver platter, and seeing the look on his face when he did it would be very memorable, he was sure.

****Scene Nineteen**_** Ninety-Nine Bottles On The Wall**_**

Volatile substances flew, their containers smashed, the chemical compounds mixed and stirred in the chaos of thrashing close-quarters battle. Forced to abandon his place at the desk, Acetylcholine had snatched his work in progress and ducked out of the way.

Ducking out of the way of a very irate Hunter in a tightly packed, relatively small room was not easy, and it required constant motion. The ducking didn't stop once it began â€" but Maestro, Tejan and the other two with them were firing off pot shots at it â€" if one or two rounds missed, it usually went into a sealed container and burst it.

Flyer dropped under the swinging arm shield the creature wore, and rolled back to his feet, now soaked in some horribly disorienting chemical mixed with some horribly smelly other chemical. Gagging, he staggered awayâ€" and the Hunter staggered away from him, emitting a strange, alien sounding moan.

Maestro took a plasma grenade in hand, snarled in frustration and put it back on his belt. Gods only knew what would happen to all the loose fumes in this room if something explosive went off, and catching the look on Acetyl's face in passing told him his rescinded decision to use the grenade had been a wise action. Already the air sizzled oddly for the passage of mere plasma bolts from their DER-55s and the Hunter's cannon rounds.

Looking up at the shelving from where he was currently hunkered, Acetylcholine reached up and snatched a fist-sized container made of pure glass from between a leaking metal tin and a busted clay jar, but none of them were labeled in a language Flyer understood, so he had no idea what it was that Acetyl had just grabbed â€" even though he was handling it gingerly and kept hissing every time he touched the wet side. Looking back at the turning Hunter, he waved at Maestro, trying to make him shoot the thing so it would turn its back to Acetyl.

It took a moment, but he got the message â€" and Tejan joined him to better get the creature's attention turned properly. As soon as its bright orange back was turned and exposed, the spines across the shoulders waving and bobbing in an agitated manner, Acetylcholine reached out and extended forward, throwing the glass jar with all his might in an effort to smash it against the Hunter's exposed flesh. Flyer watched it fly, watched it land, watched as instead of smashing it was practically swallowed into the writhing mass of symbiotic worms. Saw the look of pure frustration on the scientist's face.

He raised his own DER-55, aimed it as best he was able, and took the shot. The glass jar exploded like a weird grenade, spraying worms, armor and something that burned like hellfire when it splashed across Flyer's arm. He stared in horror at his gauntlet as it dissolved before his eyes, and the melting substance began to eat the muscle on his arm after breaching the metal plating before he could drop his gun and claw the thing off, causing him to scream at it â€" it hurt like all hell and he couldn't get it off fast enough.

All around the room, everyone else was having the same nightmare. Someone was even bawling like they'd gotten it in their eyes, but no one dared ball on the floor â€" Flyer was still dizzy from the last roll he'd been forced into. Still, even as Acetyl clawed the helmet

from his head and threw it away before clawing out of his vest, there was some good news â€" the Hunter, by all respects, was completely defeated.

Writhing worms soon lay still, consumed or killed by the myriad chemical spills on the floor, and part of one armor plate was dissolving into a pool on the floor, which was also eating the floor too. Tejan looked up in time to watch as one of his fellows clawed first his helmet then his own skull from his person, completing the work the substance had only begun. Turning away with a shudder, he wrapped a hand around the burned area on his shoulder as he looked at Maestro, who had been forced out of most of his armor. He'd suffered chemical burns down the side of his head, down his throat and across one side of his chest â€" but he was standing, and glaring bitterly at Acetyl, even as the scientist began throwing more things on the floor, to combat the rising vapor content in the air they were trying to breathe.

"What are you doing?" Flyer asked.

"Neutralizing the active componentsâ€¦ I hopeâ€¦ that have been spilled." He replied.

"You hope?" Flyer pressed.

"I don't know what this substance on the floor is, Flyer, give me a break here. I've never been brave enough to mix a little of everything I own all into the same hopper before!" Acetyl shot back. "This messâ€¦ it's gods knows what and will do gods know anything, for all I know. The chemical reactions between substances haven't been documented, especially not in the presence of so many other contributing factors."

"Okay." Flyer sighed, feeling scorched.

"Contributing factors!!" Maestro growled. "What in the nine hells was that?? Look at me â€" I'm covered in it and it's taking my skin off! I'm considering contributing this factor on you!"

Acetyl looked over at him, his expression grim. "That was nitric acid."

"Acid!" Flyer squeaked. "You threw acid at that thing?? And you let me shoot it?? Look at what I've done!"

"I had hoped it would only break and sheath the Hunter. I haven't documented the reaction of various acids to the sudden introduction to superheated gasses, either." Acetyl responded, sounding rather miffed, looking back at Flyer. "Now we need to vacate this area before something volatile results from all this chemical mixingâ€¦ or worse, the floor falls out from under us and more things get added to this mess. Fair?"

"What about yourâ€¦ gadget?" Tejan injected, tentative.

"It's not finished, but there's no way I'll fix that now, not with needing to swim through the mess that that Hunter made of my desk. It would take hours to find anything in that mess, and I'm not in the mood to be the test subject to prolonged exposure to these fumes." He helped Flyer past the dissolving Hunter's scattered remains, heading

for the door.

Tejan took one last look at the self-decapitated warrior next to him, seeing the acid eating away at the fellow's head before turning away and following the others out the door. Gathered there, in the corridor, the group contemplated their options. Dead littered the hall in both directions, but holes had been punched in the walls by grenade and cannon action, even as the bond-brother to the Hunter they had obliterated lay in the middle of one collapsed heap of wall— this one still relatively intact, if sagged against the rubble.

The assembled part of his device hung on his belt, Acetyl led the party through that hole to save some time as they passed through the mostly Brute-controlled area back towards where they hoped to find more friendlies.

"So what is it, that thing you were trying to make?" Flyer asked, noting how miserable their band looked, covered in acid burns and missing any decent amount of armor between them.

"It was supposed to be—" He looked over at the Mirrator'd pilot and sighed, shaking his head. "Nevermind— think of it as an explosive that takes cruisers out of the sky."

"Okay, I appreciate your sparing me the overly complex scientific explanation for what it does— you were going to blow up a cruiser with that little thing?"

"Not now. I didn't get to finish it, there's no containment. It's got a sub-atomic breaker aligned with the charge detonator, which uses the surrounding elements as fuel — without containment, this means everything will get consumed and obliterated. If I set it off, and there's no telling how much of a time delay it will have either, it could do one of two things — fizzle and sit pretty for the rest of eternity, or cause this whole moon to vaporize into space grit. Finer than the sand particles in the polishing solution used to scour your armor."

"I didn't know that was sand—" Flyer mentioned.

"More or less — silica carbonate and copper sulfate crystals. Nothing special, but it works. A bit poisonous, too—" He mentioned, scratching the side of a mandible. "Still, I'm really a little reluctant to use it at all, without the containment attachments."

"Oh, well." Flyer sighed. "We can always take the cruisers some other way."

"You think?" Acetyl asked. "I detected minute traces of HCM-3 in the atmosphere a couple of hours ago."

"You're expecting me to know what that is?"

"HCM— Hyper-Contagious Mutagen. HCM-3 is a retro-viral genetic based infection that effects changes in form and shape while altering the genetic code of the host form to suit the needs of the virus. Really rather— grotesque, but— medically speaking, there's no accounting for taste."

Flyer heaved a sigh. "In a word?"

"Flood."

****Scene Twenty **_**Situational Awareness**_**

After taking down most of the next wave of Brute troops, with increasing numbers of Jackal and Grunt forces, the dwindled Strike Team, reinforced by the Councilors and the two Spartans, had decided to pause for breath. Evilkitty, apart from the main body of the group, spent some time wondering if the last thing Aardvark had said to her had saved her from the other female's fate.

Move, she'd said. Move, fast. She had moved, of course, never one to turn down direction in a heated situation where most of her own directional ability was smashed beneath self-preservation instincts. But she'd only barely moved far enough, and had been left at the precipice when everything had stopped moving.

Kuro sat at Aozora's elbow, the mated pair conversing quietly about gods knew what. Lai stood leaned on a structure wall with his arms crossed, listening to Omega talk to Soulshadow. DLNG0, seated leaned on a busted wall across from the Admiral and his mate, had his head rolled back and looked like he was either dead or asleep. Knowing DLNG0, he probably always looked like that when he was catching rest. Both Spartans were on watch, though standing mostly idle for the task as no opening between upright lengths of stone fencing or wall required any patrolling or pacing to span. Neither said a word.

After a moment, Aozora stood, finishing his conversation with Kuro, and went to talk to Soulguard, who was leaned on the same wall as Lai Tasha. Standing, Kuro closed the gap between herself and Evilkitty, coming to a stop a pace from where she squatted atop a waist-high wall facing a broad expanse of shelled-out city.

"Hey." She called, softly.

Evilkitty only grunted.

"You're awful quiet." Kuro mentioned. "You're not usually quiet. What's on your mind, Evilkitty?"

"Trying to make sense of the last twenty-four hours, that's all." She responded, her tone muted. "It doesn't seem right, to me. Everything is happening so fastâ€¦"

"I know." Kuro sighed, looking past the half-wall out across the flattened span of city. Punctures into the subterranean half of the city marked the place like markers on a map, but none of these had been explored by the enemy, as usually such breaks in structural integrity caused the holes they exposed the existence of to fill in, and nobody felt like digging.

"You were there." Evilkitty looked over at her. "You sawâ€¦ her."

Kuro only shook her head. "All I saw was her arm. The rest was smashed beneath a section of stone too great for me to

move."

Evilkitty sighed, and looked down. "Stillâ€¦ can one be written off so lightly? I know we couldn't stay, rightly, with two divisions coming down on us, butâ€¦ shouldn't we at least go back, and see if maybe sheâ€¦"

"Evilkitty, there's no point." Kuro pleaded. "People die, in war, and most of the time their remains cannot be retrieved. You need to accept that fact. Aardvark knew what she was doing, knew the risks when she came here the first time. I don't like that she's among the fallen any more than you do â€" I've already had this conversation with Aozora more than once. He feels responsible!"

Evilkitty looked over at her again. "Maybe you're right."

Kuro started to turn away, started to walk back towards the others, but stopped dead when something echoed through her head like thunderâ€¦ but it wasn't thunder. Disoriented, she shook her head, and looked around, wondering if anyone else had heard that. DINGO was still dozing, and no one else appeared so much as disturbedâ€¦ pausing, Kuro focused inward, wondering if she had hit her head somewhere along the way and was only now feeling the effects, but instead she felt another wave crash over her.

This time she caught the full brunt, and understood exactly what it was; part of a song. Words echoed dizzily through her head, playing back over one another even as more were added. And as suddenly as it had begun, it quit, leaving her feeling rather hollow, and covered in a cold sweat. She turned her broadened eyes to Evilkitty, who was looking at her with a puzzled, concerned expression.

"Aardvark." She breathed, as if in revelation.

"What?" Evilkitty asked.

"I can feel her! She'sâ€¦" Kuro looked back out at the broad, empty span of rubble and detritus, as if searching for a figure among the wreckage. "She's out there."

"You just said she wasn't. You only just got through telling me how dead she was!" Evilkitty protested. "How do you know?"

"I've always had sharp senses, EK. But Aardvarkâ€¦ she has something else. Sheâ€¦ it's as if she knows how attuned I am to what I sense, and she's calling to me."

"From the dead?"

"No! Noâ€¦ if that were the case, then she could not be crying so piteously. She's in pain."

"Sometimes you hear about that." Evilkitty said, hopping down from the wall top. "What are you getting at, though?"

"Come with me." Kuro begged, suddenly. "Come with me, and I will lead you to her. Then we can bring her back!"

"Shouldn't we tell the guys?" Evilkitty asked. "If nothing else but to let them know we aren't stolen like Warbirds was?"

Kuro looked back at the gathering, then at Evilkitty. "You have a comn." She said, shrugging. "Come on, we need to move quickly. I'm getting the feeling we don't have a lot of time to find her."

"Or what, she'll die again?" Evilkitty asked, turning to follow the smaller female as she set out through the city streets.

"She just might, yeah. It's hard to tell when all you feel is fear." Kuro led the way over, through and around much of the city's remaining standing structures, moving always at a trot despite her exhaustion. Evilkitty kept up easily enough, aware that when someone was as hell-bent on something as Kuro now was, there would be no stopping them — only letting them go alone, and she had a feeling Kuro had asked her along not for the company, but for someone to watch her back while she performed her little self-appointed S&R mission.

The girls skirted a moving Brute patrol, then their following platoon, and hooked around a glaringly obvious sniper trap to come about and down into the subterranean level to avoid a ground-level base of operations the Brutes had set up. While Kuro could fight, she wasn't as good as Evilkitty and nowhere close to the skill level of her mate. This added to the fact that her feelings were telling her not to exert more energy than she had to. She got the impression that this might be due to her needing to use that conserved energy to carry her target back with her.

Surfacing on the other side, Kuro eased up through the tight little hole that was partially blocked by too much dirt as well as a woody bush that she didn't want to leave swaying to mark her passage. Activating her Mirrator'd augmented cloaking device, she slunk forward, watching all corners of the street square she had just entered. For the most part it was empty, but she held to the burning feeling that there was something lurking nearby, if it wasn't already watching her. She looked back, but the last she could discern of Evilkitty was when she eased the branch back where it had grown to and let go of it. After that, Kuro could only make a reasonably well informed guess where her companion was, as her eye was not as expert at picking out cloaked forms as everyone else's here.

The talent would come with time, she was sure, as while they were still visible if one was really looking, they were exceedingly hard to spot by the untrained eye. This was especially true when the cloak was worn by an expert stealth warrior — otherwise known as a Mirrator'd officer. Kuro stepped lightly across the cobblestone-paved street, reaching the far wall of the tall structure there and looking around again. Apart from the faint scent of something foul that she suspected was likely something dead in the process of decomposing, the square was quiet. Carefully, she strode towards the alley where she felt compelled to go, collecting her nerves and trying not to breathe as the faint whiff became a pungent odor the farther along down the alley she went. Out at the other end, there was a tendril as thick as she was snaked across the broken cobblestones, rooted through them into the ground. She looked around, spotting more of the same, as well as a crouched Flood combat form. But for now, there was only one. Struggling not to inhale anything that might be spores, Kuro then looked for Evilkitty for advice. Here the trail ended, and all she wanted now was to go tearing back the way she had come, though preferably not in so much of a frightened panic.

Evilkitty touched her shoulder, signaling where she was, then moved in a manner that suggested to Kuro that she was gesturing along the street to a building that was remarkably intact despite the bombardment and despite the Flood.

Kuro took one look at the place and instantly was repelled by it " without reason why. As she watched, though, a troop's worth of Flood combat forms charged at the place, apparently assuming it had to contain food, but got within a few hundred yards of the outer wall and suddenly lost interest" again, for no apparent reason. Suddenly she was hit by an epiphany; if the Flood were being repelled from there, then that was probably a good place to start looking. When she took the first step forward, she felt uncertain if this was a good idea, but by the time she had gotten a yard's distance covered, she had blotted out all senses save the ones she couldn't do that to.

At the wall, she circled until she found an entrance, and pressed the solid metal door open. The hinging mechanism groaned as if in aging protest, but it moved easily enough " like as if the rust had already been broken and the door opened once already. Evilkitty stepped in after her, and pressed it closed in the faces of the next hesitating attack wave.

"We shouldn't be in here." She hissed. "Let's go. What are you going after?"

"I don't know" but if the Flood don't go here, then I want to check it out at least."

"You could be walking into a trap." Evilkitty protested. "I don't like this place."

"Neither do I" and that's precisely why I'm not leaving." Kuro announced, before marching boldly deeper into the maze-like interior of the structure.

"Kuro!" Evilkitty called, frustrated. She lingered at the door for a moment more before giving it up and following, sharing at least that she had no desire to be alone when and if the Flood did decide to actually storm the place. The building had an entrance to the subterranean passages, as well as ascending stairs to the upper levels of which there were three.

The first thing Evilkitty noted was the smeared print of a Sangheili hand on the corner of one wall, colored a brackish violet-black. When she turned from it, she had to backpedal a few steps to keep from walking right over Kuro, who had stopped.

"Kuro?" Evilkitty stepped past her, to see what she was looking at. "What are you" oh, no." She observed. There in the corner of the first room beyond the foyer sat curled a beaten, bloody Sangheili female, staring at them from hollow, bloodshot eyes. One arm had been tied to her chest, but it looked as though it were barely still attached to her person, and though probably the least dire, it was the greatest injury on her. The scar deep in the metal of her dented helmet suggested she either had skull fractures or a concussion or both, but she just sat there, staring at them, in a kind of defiant silence.

"Aardvark." Kuro greeted, noting the DER-55 in the female's good hand. "Howâ€¦ how did you call me?"

Her only response was a grim, mirthless smile.

"Come on, we need to get out of here." Evilkitty said, stepping forward despite any deranged reactions Aardvark might have, and pulled her from the floor to wrap her good arm around her shoulders, while holding to Aardvark's waist with her other arm. "Kuro, lead. Go, go." She prompted, before following her back out the way they had come.

At the door to street level, though, they were met by Flood â€" and lots of them. Whatever Aardvark had been doing to them, she had quit, and now they wanted in rather badly. Kuro learned this when as soon as she had the door open, a combat form raked its calcite claws across her shielding in greeting.

With a startled shriek she slammed the door on its arm, clipping it off completely as the heavy metal thing slammed shut. "Other way out, other way out!" She ordered, getting Evilkitty turned around and heading them towards the previously noted underground passage entrance. The door suffered a series of strikes, and it started to press back open again, but Kuro had nothing to brace against it save her own self.

Slamming a shoulder into her side of the barrier, it clamped shut again, but the press on the other side was growing more urgent. When Evilkitty stopped and turned to see her, she snarled at her. "Go, curse you! You move slowly with her on your shoulder. I will catch up when you have gained sufficient distance!" Kuro ordered, being shoved forward and needing to slam against the door again to make it stay shut. "Go! Go!"

Evilkitty frowned at her, but she understood that Kuro, while small, could easily outpace the Flood in the time it took them to get the door open enough to pass â€" but Evilkitty couldn't, not with a load that weighed almost what she did on her arm. Aardvark wasn't exactly walking.

She got down into the depths of the unlit subterranean corridor and had made the first corner when she heard the resonant echo of a thunderous boom, followed only by a blood-curdling scream.

****Scene Twenty-one **_**Them vs. You vs. Me**_**

Flood plowed headlong into the street without care that it was already exploding and shredding under the behest of clashing Brute and Sangheili forces. Jackals and Grunts fell first, unable to withstand as much damage as their superior-sized companions, but there was no lack of supply of falling Brutes, eitherâ€¦ with the occasional Mirratord knocked back and down by the overwhelming horde and crushed beneath it without chance to rise.

Screams of the dying and injured pierced the cacophony of gunfire and snarling foes, but though on occasion one or two of the fallen would be drug back from the fight, they were then left there, to their own devices, as their rescuer moved to fill the gap they had left open.

On a ledge looking over the plaza where the battle was taking place, a lone Sangheili stood watching, a grim look on his face. He wasn't alone for very long, though, as a fellow stepped up beside him and looked down at the fray. Where they were, street level was significantly higher, as the city met the contours of the landscape on which it was built. Said the new arrival to the first on the scene, "Your orders, Admiral?"

He responded, "We cut around the rear of the Flood advance, and crush them from behind. The New Covenant forces can be dealt with later." He lit his swords, and let them sizzle in the light mist that had become of the hard rain of a few hours before.

"Still no sign of your mate, sir, I'm sorry." Soulshadow turned away, aware the Admiral hadn't been this peeved in a while, and had no intention of redirecting his attention from the obvious enemies to himself. Aozora was not cruel â€" but he wasn't kind when he was angry, either. As he left the Admiral's side, he passed Soulguard, who stepped up beside Aozora to look down at the fight on the street below.

"Chaotic, isn't it?" He muttered.

"Battle always is." Aozora responded, through his teeth.

"I wasn't talking about the fighting below us, Admiral." Soulguard looked at him. "We have already lost three of your Strike Team, and a Councilor â€" do not make us lose you too."

Aozora looked down for a moment, before looking back at the Councilor next to him. "I will fight this until it kills me or it ceases to be. Any losses rendered between now and then aren't my problem."

"Admiral, these warriors are your responsibility. You understand the way Lone feels, now â€" but there is much still yet to fight for. You don't know that Kuro is dead, only that she's missing."

"I have lost my best friend, my mate and countless others, Councilor. This does not defeat me. I am bitter â€" not dead." Aozora snarled, before extending over the edge and dropping to the fight on the street level below them. Soulguard sighed, watching as the Admiral hit and rolled, stretching up to his hooves again before charging the fray.

He turned to see the others, all gathered and watching. "Come. Let us join him."

****Scene Twenty-two **_**Breaking Even**_**

Warbirds looked up from what he was doing at the remote terminal when a couple of odd noises echoed up the hall, wondering what they had been. It was odd â€" the sound was slightly familiar, but yet he couldn't place it due to not having heard it in a long while. It also sounded out of place here. Unable to put his finger on what, Warbirds quickly finished where he was, and moved on. The noise evoked an old memory of terror, something that didn't come to him easily.

That meant it could only be beyond the normal spectrum of bad news. Approaching the Command Deck, he encountered not only heavy but

bolstered resistance, and despite his superiority in combat effectiveness to most of his race, he was driven back without shielding and forced to take cover around the corner. He snarled in frustration when a power drainer device stood up next to that corner, driving him farther back. Filing past it, Brutes without care of the thing followed, throwing more of the same, similarly using them all until Warbirds became quite irate and charged them anyway.

He tore the first three asunder without contest, but the rest came up to meet him, snarling, roaring, spitting spikes as long as his forearm and as hot as a mini sun. One would have lodged in his shoulder had it not gone all the way through, sliding through the meat above his shoulder next to his neck without stalling. Warbirds snarled for the pain as it shot up the side of his head and caused his mandibles to lock involuntarily, swiped the power drainer device from the floor and smashed it's emitter on a Brute's face. The creature got the shock of it's life, for that, but it was only a half second's worth of charge and all it did was knock him back with stars in his eyes.

Warbirds took a solid hit from the side he wasn't minding actively, but it banged harmlessly off his shields, recovered enough now to catch the blow. It staggered him somewhat, but he came back with even more of the shielding around him and with twice the peeved attitude. He had just lain the last one out flat for fertilizer in bloody defiance of the odds when more caught up with him, and the first thing that happened was yet another power drainer was settled onto the floor. Really pissed off now, Warbirds spun around the corner to avoid the first magazine of spikes and plasma rounds, then came back too fast for the t25DERs to cool or the spike rifles to get reloaded, and began to weave between the panicking Brutes with his Mirrator'd swords, slicing them down to more manageable component parts and pieces.

One got in a single hit with a fist, but all it did was spare him his fate for another three seconds, and nothing more. Warbirds cut the last one down, and then kicked the power drainer device to knock it off its tripod so it smashed into the floor. He stood still for a moment, to catch his breath, and spared a moment to look at his swords. They had dimmed, the power output taxed for the repeated and almost constant use, but they still had some power left yet. His arms, though, were a different story. One of the times he'd been punched, it had caused an involuntary flexing, and he'd cut himself on one of the blades, something he hadn't done in a long time.

Practically his whole person was coated in intermittent patches of dried and wet blood, not all of it from Jiralhanae veins. War was hard workâ€”and the Zealot standing alone in the middle of it all was wearied indeed. But he wasn't done, and he knew it, knowing also that if he took too much time, he could well end up the last surviving Mirrator'd warrior. He needed to get and keep that Command Deck, and soon. But with the recent tactic of using power drainers and bubble shielding, it was becoming harder for him to keep the upper hand. They were wearing him down, little by little, and soon he wouldn't have any more to give them. Determination fell short at the same time as capability did.

But he wasn't spent quite yet, and slicking some of the blood off his face to better see past it all, Warbirds strode back the way he'd

come, before forced to retreat. If they wanted to fight, then he was going to give them a fight they would never remember.

"Where are my brothers when I need them?" He muttered, shrugging the shoulder that was slightly more sore than the other.

****Scene Twenty-three **_**Thrall of Timeflow**_**

Mr. Evil 37, or better known to his Sangheili brothers as Evil, or 37 to the Spartans involved, had seen better, prettier days. All around him destruction reigned, divided between utter chaos wrought of the New Covenant and total destruction and reform rendered by the Flood introductionâ€¦ he'd seen the cruisers venting some odd greenish gasses before the parasite had shown up, and wondered what it was and why they were letting it into the atmosphere, until he'd seen the first spore-covered corpse and known precisely what was going on. He had begun to lose hope of ever finding any friendlies ever since his stealth craft had landed in the ruined craft bay.

It had been rather distressing to think the Brutes thought they needed the parasite to wipe out the Mirratord, but they were right â€” the Flood was quite possibly the one adversary that the Mirratord were no better than anyone else at combating; it put them in the exact same boat as anyone else would be in, were Flood introduced. It also kept needed Mirratord officers and members from driving back the Brute incursion as one united force. With the Flood involved, groups were divided, cut off, often occupied with combat forms and carrier forms, though so far there was no sign of many pure forms yet.

If the Brutes truly knew what they were doing, the Mirratord would be history very soon. He'd walked across enough dead on all three sides of this battle to know something wasn't quite right, though. The Flood was no one's ally. They were killing everything, Brutes and Elites alike, but the Brutes were far fewer. He'd seen enough spores to wear a Ranger helmet, seen enough decomposing piles of rotted flesh and deformed and malformed bodies to know someone had been killing Flood, too. His tracking of their motions so far had produced nothing, though, but he refused to despair so early.

He'd only just gotten back from an extracurricular mission, but this place was all very freshly torn. The battle was new, maybe all of two or three days old, at best. Even Flood couldn't take over the entire hidden base that fast, not when every last one of them was always armed and possessed of a fighting prowess no other Sangheili entrenchment had. No, the Mirratord would hold them off, like they always had. With so many Mirratord in one place to see to this problem, there were no doubts about the level of care it would receive.

Mistakes abounded, but so far the only one the Mirratord owned was letting that spy into their ranks. The mess caused by it was visible more so now than before, though, and it was in full swing at the apex of its troublesomeness. Noâ€¦ if things were this bad, they could only get better, as there was nothing nearly so worse as being overrun by not only New Covenant forces but infected by Flood at the same time.

Things could only get better. Evil hopped the low end of a broken wall, and stepped out onto a raised plaza that had a view of a large area of the city that was little more than short, small hills of

rubble. On the other side, amid the numerous tracks through the dust of combat-shod hooves, there was a path almost, made of all of the occupants filing off through that archway and down the street towards one of the places that if Evil's memory served, was where the ground level dropped by about thirty feet. The city tended to follow the contours of the land, but some places weren't hills, but small cliff sides, sheer drops leading to lower portions of the city where water was more likely to go. It was really a miracle the subterranean passages hadn't flooded out already.

Following the trail of tracks, Evil found himself standing on a ledge over looking a central square where many streets met in juncture, looking down at the last trailing embers of a fiery battle between not one or two but all three combatants " ally, enemy, and Flood " introduced to this game. He smiled, and leapt off the edge, to join them.

No" it could only get better.

****Scene Twenty-four **_**Micro Titans**_**

Acetylcholine was a little less than at his wit's end. The expression on his face as he surveyed the steady, almost relaxed flow of Flood combat forms as they filed past, without noticing the scientist or his posse, was something short of despair. He had detected the introduced mutagen hours earlier, but that it could spread so quickly before anyone could react was frightening. There was nothing short of glassing the moon now that could wipe them all out. At which point there would be little to no atmosphere, no structures above or under ground, and no steady tectonic plate upon which to stand. So that left the whole base a lost cause.

Fighting for it just seemed so" useless. Flyer stepped up next to him, peering through the darkness at the partly lit procession of moving combat forms, and heaved a sigh. "So much for plan A." He muttered.

"What was plan A?" Acetyl asked.

Flyer looked at him, puzzled. "Blast the Brutes and their cronies to the hell in which they belong, and save us moving expenses."

"There were more than a few of the High Council on this base when we were attacked, Flyer, I'd be more concerned with getting everyone _out_ than killing the Brutes." Acetyl said. "You realize every face, every name they tag is one more operative we can't use anymore? This situation was beyond amending when the Flood showed up. There simply is no containment for that kind of situation. We need to erase this solar system" preferably without us in it. Or the Mirrator is suddenly front page news" and so is everyone in it."

Flyer nodded.

"What's plan B?" Maestro asked, standing behind Acetyl's other shoulder, as there was no more room to stand beside him. "What do we do now? And not to be pessimistic, but while you can glass all the worlds you like, blowing apart whole solar systems is something no one can do. That's just too big an explosion to manage."

"I'll think of something." Acetyl muttered, counting Flood forms as

they passed.

"Shh." Tejan suddenly spoke, turning everyone's heads.

"What?" Flyer asked, whispering.

Tejan scowled at him. "I said _shh._" he hissed back. Flyer frowned back for a moment before all of them turned to look as a separate dispatch of Flood forms waddled past across the path they had only just crossed. Now pinned between armies of Flood, the small group was in greater danger of being sniffed out by one side or the other. Acetyl looked from one to the other, and as soon as he spotted a gap in the first army's ranks, he grabbed Flyer and thrust him out of the alley they were in, through it and across the passage the Flood were using. Darting out behind him, he kept Flyer moving quickly until they had passed successfully right behind all the Flood. The motion might have been detected by the second army, but it didn't and couldn't matter that much. If they became pursued by too many, all they needed to do then was just find a nearby New Covenant dispatch and run through them. The Flood would stop to kill and feed off the supplied bait, and might even forget that the Mirratord members had even passed them by.

Across, Acetyl and Flyer turned to see as Maestro made his own mad dash, followed shortly by Tejan. When they were all across, Acetylcholine began to look for a quick escape from the area, well aware that to linger would only complicate their situation. He had just spied a viable path when his attention was turned around by the unmistakable gurgling of a Flood combat form that thought it saw something good to eat. Standing there in the street behind them was a lone form, facing them despite how its head was draped across its shoulder blades on its back.

Maestro's hand went to his belt for a weapon, but Acetyl stopped him, catching his wrist and holding him still. As one the four stared down the Flood form, as it made a smaller hiccup and loped forward a few steps, slowly. No one breathed, staring at the malformed parasite in total silence. It stopped approaching after it had covered a couple of yards worth of distance, and just stood there, making disgusting bubbly noises to itself.

"Aceâ€|" Flyer whispered, hoarsely.

"Shhâ€| shh." Acetyl prompted, beginning to feel the tension.
"Waitâ€|"

Suddenly the Flood form broke into motion, flailing its deformed, artificially extended arms in an uncoordinated manner as it charged at them, squalling loudly in a sick, eager anticipation. The four Mirratord warriors only flinched once, as Acetyl held them still. A mere step away, the Flood paused again, and gurgled quizzically at them, probing with the sensor antennae protruding from its host's collarbones. Maestro didn't move his hooves, but he bent out of their reach, avoiding being touched by them even as it turned then towards Flyer. He too bent away in a similar manner, somehow able to hold his balance farther out than Maestro.

Acetylcholine suspected it had something to do with hours of flight and being able to pull gees when in zero gee environments. If anyone could bend double, extend beyond one's balance range and be able to

straighten from it again, it would be Flyer. The Flood turned away, disinterested for some reason, and paced away, in that odd, limping manner all Flood seemed to own when moving slow. Acetyl had once theorized that it was likely due to the parasite harvesting calcium from the leg bones to restructure the calcite growths surrounding the upper body, but he hadn't been able to confirm or debunk the theory due to a significant lack of operatives willing to retrieve a Flood-modified body from the field.

Getting the upper echelons to agree to allow such a thing anywhere near their secret base was also something of a challenge, but now that there were samples to be had, he didn't have the time to be in his lab dissecting one. Always it had been something.

Tejan turned his head, to look at Ace in puzzlement, was about to ask how that had just transpired, when the motion caught the Flood form's attention again, and this time it came flailing back with more than a lot of its fellows. Acetyl had just one word in reply to Tejan's question at that point;

"Run!"

****Scene Twenty-five **_**Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy**_**

Evilkitty had never had so much grit on her at once like this before. The masking shade of granite grey almost masked her as well as her camouflage engine " but only when she held still amid the rubble. Having left Aardvark farther up along the subterranean passage, she now stood staring at the corner of the wall where the hall turned into a stair leading up into the interior of the building where she and Kuro had found the battered assassin-bard.

She slowly took another step forward, straining to hear some sound indicating what the Flood that had beaten the door down were doing, where they were, how many she would have to deal with immediately. Not even the whisper of falling dust met her ears, only the pounding of her own hearts and her obnoxiously loud footfalls. Logically there was no plausible way she could be stepping that loudly, but in contrast to the silence surrounding the small noises, they were loud indeed.

Arriving at the corner, she bent forward carefully, her grip on the sword in her left hand and the t25DER in her right growing tighter by the second. Leaned enough to see, she realized why the silence was so absolute. The storm outside had gathered in intensity, billowing on the hull of the cruiser sitting in the middle of it " and realizing the ship was there, all the Flood had somehow decided to gather towards it, to either take it out of the sky, or use it to escape this moon.

Bolder but wary yet, Evilkitty stepped lightly up the stairs three steps at a time, arriving at the fallen, bent and battered door on the threshold of the entrance. She squatted, looking at its oddly convex shape in relation to the floor it rested upon, and on a hunch asked, "New kind of body shield, Kuro?"

The response was as chipper as any; "Just get this bloody thing off me."

Evilkitty grinned broadly, then, and restored her weaponry to her

belt before lifting one edge of the heavy metal door so Kuro could roll over and scramble out from under it. Aside from the scuffing being rubbed into the floor gave her, she was completely unhurt. Dusting some of the larger grit particles off as she stood, she turned to look back at Evilkitty.

"You lookâ€¦ nice." She offered, looking strangely at the fine dust coating all over Evilkitty's armor. "Where did you leave Aardvark?"

"Back this way. Come on â€" I have a bad feeling that we're fast running out of time to linger. The Flood have begun to gather towards that cruiser holding over the western edge of the city." She let the door hit with a bang, and turned back down the stair. It didn't take them long to arrive at the crumbled area where Aardvark had been left, at which point progress again slowed to the best speed Evilkitty could manage with her Mirrator's sister on her arm.

Kuro stayed out ahead to make sure what slow progress they made was continuous and unimpeded, finding the clearest, best suited paths to take that required little or no climbing, and marginal need for ascending heaps of rubble. After an hour's travel, Kuro drew to a stop at the peak of a rolling hill in the streets, to see far across the mostly demolished city. In the distance a ways from the gravity beam of the cruiser, she could just see motion that she could identify as members of the group she had abandoned in search of the one thought dead; slamming headlong into a nasty fight that mixed all three sides of the combat seen on their small moon. She hoped they could all make it out of that mess alive, because without them there was no way she would get out of it herself as alone as she was.

Evilkitty took the opportunity to sit down and catch her breath, but after putting Aardvark down, she felt buoyant. It was an odd, euphoric feeling, but she knew it was also artificial; generated by the simple physics surrounding a significant and sudden loss of weight to carry. Huffing, she turned her head to look at Aardvark, but for the moment, she seemed to be biding her time; and the more slight of the two females remained quiet.

Looking up at Kuro, she squinted past the lights coming off the carrier that had reduced Kuro's form to a silhouette. "How much farther, can you see?"

"A long, long ways." Kuro noted, sadly. "I do see a cut we can make to take some distance and time off our journey, but it is straight through the heart of the Flood infectionâ€¦"

"How much time, and distance?" Evilkitty asked.

"Be my guess three hours. Easily. Andâ€¦ more than half the distance." Kuro responded, before turning to see Evilkitty, pacing the distance between them and sitting beside her, opposite Aardvark. "How is she?"

Evilkitty looked back at Aardvark. "I don't know. She's quiet. Breath sounds a bit shallow, but that could mean anything."

"What about you?" Kuro asked.

"I feel like I put down a house when I put her down. You'd think she couldn't weigh that much, seeing how she's skinnier than I am, butâ€¦"

"Evilkitty, she's got armor on. And you and I both know she's got a heavier gauge of it than you and I do. She likes it that way."

"I wonder how she manages to be so quick, toting that." Evilkitty grumped. "I don't suppose she'd let me take it off her, either, huh?" She asked, pointing the query more at Aardvark than at Kuro, but Kuro was the only one to respond.

"I've begun to think it was that very element that spared her life in the collapse, Evilkitty. Her armor was thicker, so it didn't break or crush like it might have. And you never know â€" it could be holding in an injury that once you remove it, will spill out and kill her." Kuro reasoned. "We'll manage â€" she doesn't need to be armorless out here anyway. I don't care how heavy it is."

"You get to carry her for the next mile." Evilkitty decided.

Kuro rolled her eyes. "I don't know what she sees in you."

"She sees something in me?" Evilkitty asked.

"Come on, up, up." Kuro beckoned, rising to her hooves again and pulling Evilkitty up to hers on her way. Stepping over to Aardvark, she stopped in her tracks as the assassin-bard picked her own self up, albeit slowly. "Aardvark?" She questioned.

Aardvark drew a deep breath, and held it for a moment before answering, though with barely enough volume to be heard. "I can walk."

"Is that how come you got so far from where we left you?" Evilkitty asked.

"How fast can you walk?" Kuro pressed.

"Fast enough." Was the only answer. She followed the other two as they proceeded along their chosen route, keeping up well enough although with less gusto. Before reaching the juncture that would decide which length of route they took ultimately, though, Kuro turned her comn unit on again, supposing now would be a good time to know for sure how much time they had; and if they were attacked, now was as good a time as any. She stood still upon reaching the juncture, and listened, with Evilkitty watching her as she did so.

Finally, she decided, and pointed right; the short, dangerous road straight through the middle of Flood country. If they made it, they would make it before anything horribly drastic happened and would be able to rejoin the rest of the Mirrator. If they didn't, then it wouldn't matter that much, as with the current rate of decay the situation was suffering would leave them all dead if found separated anyway.

Being fleet of foot would be hampered, though, by their third member. Aardvark, while willing and more or less capable of walking, could not even begin to run. If the other two ran, she would be left

behind. Kuro looked back at her, only then finally closing the last gap between them. Her face was still pain-stricken, but she remained stoic and silent about it. Kuro wondered what was driving her " it was well known what the female was capable of, what she would do under certain circumstances, but the driving force behind that iron will had yet to be revealed. "We're going straight through the middle of the biggest concentration of Flood in the city, Aardvark. We all know what that means " we either run hard and run fast, or we fight our way through. Which one do you think you can handle?"

Evilkitty looked from Kuro to Aardvark, waiting for an answer that never came. She just stood there, staring them down, silent as a tomb. Finally, Evilkitty spoke. "Come on. We'll pick our method as the need presents itself."

Kuro nodded, satisfied with that; turning from Aardvark, she led the way, following more her keen senses than anything else, as almost as soon as the line had been breached, all the streets began to look very much alike, and all sense of direction was lost save the stapled outline of the cruiser in the sky over the city ahead of them. More ground was covered than expected, in less time than expected, even though Kuro and Evilkitty still had to frequently pause to aid Aardvark along, at one point holding her between them as they pelted past an inobservant batch of strolling Flood heading in the same direction.

All stop was called when the unexpected appeared; Brutes, and not Brute Flood combat forms, but just Brutes, and right in the middle of the Flood occupied end of the city; around them were the as yet unclaimed bodies of their squadrons of Unggoy and Kig-yar, but aside from being scarred with fresh battle-marks, the Jiralhanae parts of the dispatch appeared no worse for the wear, spare only one who had been passed up some ways back. There were six of them, only, and while otherwise healthy only one of those was seeping green fluid with the bloody wounds down one arm.

At the sight of the three Sangheili females suddenly dropping into their presence, the Brute's first reaction was to stop and stare in shock; then spare a short moment to laugh as all three wore a warrior's get-up, and then they got down to the business of shooting at them, to try to kill them. The delay in action, though, proved their undoing, as Evilkitty's first reaction was to prime a pair of grenades, and while the raggedy bunch laughed at her, she threw both at once " her left arm throw was almost as accurate as her right arm throw " and stuck the burning plasmoids to one each of the Brutes; Kuro used the delay to scan with her eyes for all available cover; and found it plentiful despite first impressions of none at all.

Aardvark, by all intents and purposes, stood still, the inner thumb of her good arm hooked on her belt, watching as the first two Brutes exploded, and as only one of those peeled up from the ground again with a pained moan while its kin began to shoot wildly while backing up and seeking more ample cover than the three small females might need. When one curled around a corner, it didn't do so far enough, and got the exposed arm slathered in hot plasma from the t25DER Evilkitty had gotten from Aardvark.

While Kuro hopped from cover to cover, exchanging fire with the enemy using her Carbine, and Evilkitty covered her approach with her plasma

rifle so she could use her more effective swords, the extent of motion Aardvark employed was an almost laughable snatching dance that only saw her move at all and only enough so to avoid it when she was being shot directly at. It became apparent that the less she had to, the less she was going to, when it came to moving. But bereft of all shooting weaponry, that was the extent of her participation. When one of the Brutes noticed this and tried to get in closer, hoping for a kill, he was cut off mid-stride, and quite literally so, by Evilkitty's swords.

Close enough now, she cut across the lines of fire and dove straight into the next nearest Brute, bowling it over and slicing it apart as she hit, disengaging with a completion roll right over its head, sending her back to her hooves in good enough time to come about and chop the barrels right off of the next one's spike rifles. Her next cutting motions removed the Brute of possession of his arms, and the third and final stroke denied him the rights to his head. As the body toppled, she turned, seeing Kuro had covered her nicely enough that now all of the enemy were dead—or dead enough that it didn't matter.

Turing almost as one to see Aardvark, the two paused to consider what must be a false image; there she stood, as if not having moved a muscle the whole fight. Looking back at them each once, she asked, "â€|what?"

Evilkitty and Kuro shared a look, but could only shake their heads. "We have more ground to cover â€| and it will doubtless be more treacherous than this last span." Kuro decided aloud. "Let's get moving before the Flood scent this fresh blood."

Evilkitty waited until Aardvark had caught up to their position before following Kuro's somehow accurate lead, wondering how she could tell one direction from the next in the organically overgrown streets; it all looked like exposed muscle tissues, now, completely uneven and at times slick and sticky. "What kind of Flood concentration can we expect ahead?" She asked.

"I'd go with safe rather than sorry;" Kuro answered. "More than we can handle alone."

"May we live to laugh about it later." Aardvark muttered, earning the agreement of both of her companions for the statement.

****Scene Twenty-six **_**The Pride of The Mirratord**_**

Pushing the last of the Flood forms from before him and watching it fall into a disarranged heap before him, he looked down at it, then turned to survey the rest of the scene. Oddly enough, warriors of the Mirratord stood all around him. Aozora could only smile at them, sad an expression as it was. Even angry, even snappish, even rebuking their attempts to speak to him, they were there for him, with him—like always.

His expression turned puzzled when he noticed the count seemed off, but he wasn't seeing any of the faces he would have expected to be filling those empty places. Counting again, he came back to the same conclusion; no one had fallen, but rather, there was one extra. Striding between the nearest ones, he came to a stop in front of the extra one that hadn't been there an hour before. His eyes broadened

slightly in surprise. "Evil." He greeted, suddenly. "When did you get here?"

"Nice to see you, too, Admiral." Mr. Evil responded. "I only just arrived."

"Alone?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why, I wonder, is everyone always isolated from one another when disaster strikes?" Aozora grouched, turning to see the rest of them. Soulguard, wearing an odd pattern of Flood goo over one shoulder, looked rather more comical than composed, even though he personally didn't appear to have noticed the smelly stuff past all the rest of it at his hooves. And Lai Tasha was flipping the top of his zippo again, bored almost as soon as the fight was overwith. Aozora sighed, a little annoyed at the constant _flipâ€¦ clickâ€¦ flipâ€¦ click_ in the background but unwilling to complain aloud. This was something Lai had always done, and would continue to do for the rest of his lifeâ€¦ and curse the Human who had given the damn thing to him, but there was nothing Aozora could do about it now.

"Because you can't ever expect the unexpectedâ€¦ that's why it's the unexpected." Omega offered, plucking idly at a few peeling scales of dried Brute blood on the elbow of one gauntlet. "And while we expected to be attacked by the New Covenant, getting hit with Flood was a new one on us. Right, Soulguard?"

Soulguard only rolled his eyes.

Aozora huffed a breath past his upper lip, and stalked to the edge of the square, looking for a viable path that wouldn't lead them down the throat of a meat grinder. Pausing for a moment, he raised a hand to the bug in his ear, and cupped it, blocking out all other noise.

"â€¦_fftâ€¦fer right! Take that one down now!"_ The voice was female; but it wasn't Kuro. Puzzled, and unable to identify the speaker at all, he listened for another few seconds, trying to figure out what he was hearing. Static broke a high pitched cry in the back ground in half, but the responding shriek nearly overloaded the comn line; flinching, Aozora tore the device from his ear, grimacing. He turned back to see the others he had come this far with, his mind reeling. From his hand, the bug added, _"Grab her! Grab her! We have to move!"_ This time it sounded like only one in the Mirrator'd ever could; that time, it was Evilkitty.

Soulshadow stepped closer to him, having heard the tiny voices coming through the earbug, and wondering what they were saying. "Admiral?"

"Something isn't right." He responded. "Turn your long range boosters on, and listen for a moment."

Obediently, Soulshadow activated the comn signal booster, and promptly tore his own bug from his ear. "Gahh!"

"You hear that?"

"I heard a sound almost too high pitched to be anything but painful, is what I heard." Soulshadow answered. "What was that, sir?"

He shook his head. "That's the sound Aardvark used to make when she had too many enemy to deal with at once; it does the same thing to them as it did to us. Ingenious, reallyâ€¦ but it can't have been her because she's already been killed." Aozora shook his head, confused. "I saw her."

"She can't be on the comn lines if she's dead, Admiral. What are you saying? That the Flood that picked her body up isn't going to just gurgle like the rest?"

"I heard Evilkitty speaking close to the receiver." Aozora said. "I don't know what to think."

Soulshadow looked at his bug, then held it closer to his head, listening from what he hoped was a safe distance. When the sharp, painful noise he'd heard earlier proved to have passed, he went ahead and poked it back where it belonged, and stood there listening to it, a pensive expression on his face. One by one, the members of their party tuned in to see what the two were talking about, and Aozora was the last to replace his bug.

"â€¦t! Shut that door! We can't hold â€¦ ey off!"

"That sounds like Evilkitty." Soulguard piped up.

"It is Evilkitty." Aozora decided. "Who is she talking to, though?"

Everyone simultaneously flinched when something at the other end of the line went bang and sky high while it was at it. There was a startled squeak, then a string of rather bald expletives from someone who was speaking too low and from too far away to be understood well enough to tell if it was Evilkitty again or someone else with her. A second female voice piped through; _"You whole?"_

Aozora stiffened. "Kuro!"

"_What was that?"_ They heard Evilkitty ask. "_I can't hear a damn thing. My ears are ringing too loudly. You're going to have to â€¦ that again."_

"Kuro! Can you hear me?" Aozora asked, cutting off something someone else said.

"_Hold that thought, Evilkittyâ€¦_" They heard Kuro say. "I swear I heard something on the comns." There was the unmistakable crackle of upset, some brief static for all the distance and the electromagnetic interference generated by the storm overhead, and then it cleared up slightly. "_Say again?"_

"Kuro?" Aozora asked. "Where are you?"

"_Aozora!_" She responded. "_Sorry I didn't call earlier â€¦er in a rush. We barely got there in time as it were â€¦ ere you doing? I had to take a short cut through the middle of the Flood dispersal. We are heading for the â€¦â€¦_"

"What?" He asked. "Say again, Kuro."

"_The â€¦, we're heading for the ship!" _She said, again.

"Copy thatâ€¦ why?"

"_Because unless you have some better way off this Flood-infested [iâ€¦.fftâ€¦ /i, that ship looks mighty fine to me."_ Kuro answered. _"We have aâ€¦. Call The Lone Heretic and have him â€¦fftâ€¦ you, and try to meet us at some point at or around that cruiser â€¦" we have way too many Fâ€¦fftâ€¦ our tail right now. We managed to block them off for now, butâ€¦"_

"Call Lone and have him what?" Aozora asked. "Why?"

"I told you! We haâ€¦fftâ€¦fftâ€¦eing this place! Now, are you going to rescue us from this mess we so nicely have gotten ourselves into or what?"

Aozora sighed. "I still didn't get that part, Kuro, could you say it again?"

Kuro made a disgusted, impatient noise, before something squishy splattered on a nearby surface, emitted a distinctly Flood like groan, and piled up, presumably on the floor. _"Just get your ass â€¦fftâ€¦! I'll explain when I get there!"_

"Get where?" Aozora asked. "Kuro!" But all that came through then was harsh sounding static, as the formerly dormant storm suddenly lit up with a monster sized bolt of cloud-to-cloud lightning. "Aargh!"

"She said the ship." Lai offered. "Maybe she meant she was going to the cruiser."

"Alright, let's get moving." Aozora chose a new route, and Soulshadow took point with M.E37 on his flank. Aozora was about to follow when Soulguard stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

"Still bitter, Admiral?"

Aozora looked at him for a moment. "I don't know. Maybe notâ€¦ but her situation has hardly improved much."

Soulguard inclined his head in concession to the point. "Agreed. However, she is mobile, sounded no worse for the wear and is moving on a position we could easily reach without much delay. Is this not considered an improvement? You know where she is, and where she'll be, so you can find her again."

"Yes." Aozora sighed. "Alright, alright."

"You are still not dead, though, but that part no one can begrudge you." Soulguard added, in jest, before moving out ahead before the Admiral could protest. He was still smiling partly at the Councilor's humor, though, even as he took up the rear of the group as they all moved for the belly of the cruiser.

It took more than just a little of the foreseen available time, to close most of the gap between their original position in the city and

where the cruiser had parked its grav table. And though they were moving quietly for the most part, it still became a necessary action to attack when an otherwise impassible dispatch of New Covenant forces turned up in front of them. There were too many to go around or through, but not too many to so much as daunt any one of the warriors witness to the spectacle.

"Right or left, Admiral?" Evil asked.

"Right or left for what?" He responded.

"I want to know which side you'll be charging at so I'll know which side is available for me to charge at â€" I know better than to assume you leave folks behind."

Aozora heaved a sigh. "Pick one." Taking his blades from his belt, he charged them, the photoluminescence of the energy blades flaring in the gloom of what was quickly becoming dawn. But the darkest hour of the night happened right before dawn, affording just that much more cover to work from, before it was all lost entirely. At a signal from Soulguard, the assembled members flew from their shaded cover right into the mass of Covenant soldiers; Grunts fled in all directions at first, flailing their arms and screaming in terror, Jackals tried to form a shield phalanx, and were shattered in a similar fashion, as the Brutes began thundering orders at their disarranged troops while mustering their own responding assault.

It was too little too late, though, despite how well armed and entrenched the New Covenant had been â€" and the battle was concluded inside of the hour. First to make contact were Aozora and Soulguard, being slightly ahead of the others. Following them were Lai Tasha, Mr. Evil, Omega, and Spartan 249. The rest struck hard at all the areas left open after the initial assault wave had hit. Aozora cut left while Soulguard sliced right, the Admiral reducing more than a few of the Jackals and a couple of Brutes to component limbs and parts, the Councilor filleting three Brutes right off the top, then shredded more than a dozen Grunts when the little creatures suddenly decided to mob him all at once.

Lai Tasha hit with all the strength and power of a steam train. The commanding Brute officer, something of an oversized fellow, lost his footing immediately and fell flat before being allowed to respond in any way fashion or form. Leaving the commander to the vultures, Lai sprang from the rain-slicked ground to his own hooves again, and from there followed down a posse of passing Grunts. Spartan slammed the knives on the barrels of his guns down on a Grunt that got too close to shoot, then turned and filed down a row of Jackals that had gathered enough wit to try to line a bead or two on some of the Mirratorid who were seeming to fly through them, carving a swath wider than the breadth of their number. By the time the Brutes had the Grunts turned around and the Jackals had organized a workable shield-wall, most of their number had been slain, reducing them to crying for backup into their comm units.

Even as the rate of exchange of loosed munitions between forces maxed out, the Mirratorid just pressed right on, closing the last stretch and laying waste to the last of their enemy. Plucking his blades from the last of them to die, Soulguard turned to see if any of his own had been harmed, but before he could safely conclude anything, the so summoned hit; and all bets were off.

Caught apart from each other, each one had to fight against all sides without cover or comrade, leaving most of them feeling a little overwhelmed; more so when not one but two Hunter pairs showed up at the back of that second wave, who knew where it came from, but it filled the passage with troops that there seemed no end to.

Aozora had just cut a Brute down and crushed in the face of a Grunt when the last portion of his shielding fizzled under an intense blast of five-point energy. He ducked under the branching blast, and rolled sideways, but he could already smell the metal fumes coiling off his armor as he moved, even past the intense shock of cooked meat and hair—and when the Grunt's tank exploded beside him, it threw him from his balance and left him little more than helpless, trapped beneath a mass of jabbing, stabbing, shooting, stomping foes he couldn't push far enough away to stand up and meet. It just wasn't fair.

Lai Tasha turned like a dancer away from the Hunter's initial blast, and allowed it to cut a slot through his enemies as he deftly avoided contact with the deadly beam. He had just a quarter charge left in his own shield generator and he liked to keep it if he could, but standing in that thing's path wouldn't allow for much. Unlike Aozora, he'd seen it coming, and had had time to compensate, but even as he reached up and sliced the metal plate on the Hunter's other arm in half, to follow it with a darting thrust into the fuel core for the gun on it's other arm, he was caught unawares when another one behind him patted them both; fellow Hunter, three Brutes, a Jackal and Lai, all at once, roasting them all suitably.

The only thing isolated from the heyday in general was that odd zzzip _pow_! noise that the Admiral's armor made when he keyed the integrated GEAR system he'd had installed some years back. Spartan 249 didn't have time to counter everything, but luckily, and against all odds, he and 09 suffered a dual punch at identical moments, so instead of falling over, they collided, and were able to keep their feet. 09 muttered something over the secure comn link, but 249 didn't catch it, suddenly aware he was about to get strafed by a Hunter's gun. The only thing he had time for at that point was to grab 09 by his head and slam him downwards, to spare the unsuspecting Spartan his own fate; and it got toasty indeed inside his Mjolnir Mark V suit when it slapped across his shoulders as he too sought his knees, in a too late attempt to be missed.

He got his head ducked just in time, though, so the beam didn't strafe his helmet when it was going to, but instead of missing the crouched and kneeling Spartans without harm, what it did was cook through a Jackal and slam into Soulguard, backing him against the wall of a crumbling building and causing it to drop that wall on him and all his companions; enemy and ally alike. Both Spartans jumped clear quickly enough, but the hapless Councilor had to actually dig himself out, clawing the hewn bricks off just in time to need to bring his swords to bear to prevent his own demise when the surge of enemy came back anew to assault whatever it could find. Soulguard slammed a fist into a Brute's face and it flipped end over end, once, before settling groundward, while he swept aside a couple of Jackals and kicked the Grunt that was stupid enough to stand up to him with just a needler. The unfortunate creature flew backwards in a ballistic trajectory, and hit a Hunter across the spines hard enough to send the Grunt spinning away in a new direction and to knock the

Hunter down flat.

Not one to waste opportunity, Mr. Evil was upon the fallen but otherwise unhurt Hunter inside a breath, carving away the spines and armor to peel open the metal carapace and let the worms spill out in disarray. Swiping the gun up for just a moment, he hosed the densest patch of Brutes, utterly destroying more than fifteen of them, three of which had had shields on; among them were thirty or so Grunts and maybe all of a dozen Jackals. In the end, it was a broad enough swath for the Mirrator members to gather their wits again and meet the last of the dispatch head-on.

Soulguard wondered if he weren't being singled out for something when most of the surviving enemy came his way, but he didn't pause to ask, instead cutting and carving them all that he could reach down to more manageable sizes. After opening one Brute's chest, he was hit from behind and borne to the corpse-strewn ground, where the one on his back snarled into his ear, "Surrender now and we will kill you quickly, and with mercy."

The Councilor let the sword in his left hand sink into the liquefying cobblestone under the blade, sparing the still moment to catch his breath. Twisting his head to see the offending Brute, he gave it an odd smile, which made it snarl at him.

"Do you not hear me, Sangheili scum?"

Pulling his sword back, he slammed that fist down into the pooled stone, splashing the stuff across the Brute and his own back; but his back was armored as of yet, and even the Brute's grenade launcher blade wouldn't change that very quickly. The burning stone did distract the creature enough to make it shift its expertly placed weight, though, and instantly that it did, Soulguard kicked it off and came down on top of it, spearing it through with both swords. "An individual chooses." He told it. "A slave obeys." Reclining, he plucked the blades from the beast, and pressed to his hooves, wearied and hoping he had time to at least count his friends.

Looking around, he saw only one other like himself standing, Spartan 09, his rifle aimed at the last retreating Jackal, that was hoping to escape with its life—the creature's head exploded in a fountain of gore when the Spartan took the shot, the body sprawling in the road several feet from the connection point. Lowering the weapon, he shuffled through the bodies and rolled a Brute carcass over before kicking a dead Grunt once or twice to make it move enough for him to pluck his fellow Spartan from the dead. 249 wavered once upright, but he held his own, collecting his weaponry even as he checked for enemies, the typical Spartan behavior.

Lai soon showed up, covered in worms—and bright orange goo. He did not look the least bit happy about it, but it was all Soulguard could do not to outright laugh at his fellow Councilor's new color scheme. By the time Aozora had dug REG Omega up, the others were collected. Mr. Evil turned around once, surveying the whole scene, before stepping past the bodies towards Soulshadow. He was in the process of swiping off blotches of Grunt and Hunter blood from his armor, making muttering noises that sounded a little like griping about blood-rot; it was almost a special kind of rust that attacked one's armor like a nasty acid, making getting one's armor bloody a nasty proposition when it came time to clean one's gear.

"Hey." Evil called to him. "Is it just me or did the wind just change and send us a nasty stink?"

Soulshadow, who practically drove his whole inner compass by the way the wind blew, looked up long enough to shake his head. "Nope. Wind hasn't movedâ€¦ the Flood did, that's all."

Evil pondered that for a moment before shaking his head. "I don't want to fight Flood." He moved towards the Admiral, and was almost there, when his desire was refused him. Flood infection forms poured out of the walls of the buildings on the west side of the street, sending up a general cry of alarm. The Mirrator tried to regroup despite the bad footing available, but already the ones they had only just slain were beginning to deform, and twitch.

"Move out! Go!" Aozora ordered, having no wish to be swamped with a mass of suicidal, genocidal maniacs who had no sense of fear or self preservation whatsoever. His shield had fully charged, but that wouldn't last forever, and he was almost out of ammo without time to police for more. As one the group started hopping bodies heading out, driving hard towards the belly of the cruiser. The nose of the craft was already above them now, but the grav table was farther down the length of the craft, and the size of the ship demanded that that distance be a great deal more than they had time for.

Lai Tasha saw something glimmer beneath a Brute's elbow on his way past and dove back again to get it; taking up the rear, Soulguard snatched him up and drug him forward, pushing him along with the others. But he had it now; and now all he needed was something good enough to use it for. He kept his eyes on the sides of the street they were in, searching. Finally, he found it; the ideal place. He darted ahead, gaining on the lead warrior before finding his place and settling there to wait for the last of his own party to pass it. In the back, Soulguard got the distinct feeling he wasn't going fast enough as his senses screamed bloody murder at him. Sparing a glance over his shoulder, he was able to dodge the first leaper, but the next one caught him squarely and slammed them both to the ground.

One by one the members of his party clawed to a halt and retreated back to him to help, but for the first sixteen seconds he was on his own, and the Flood piled on even as he built a pyre out of them in kindling sized pieces. Spared enough of them from that angle to get his feet, the Councilor darted for freedom; he held no great wish to battle a horde of Flood to the death, as not only would it serve no purpose whatsoever, it was a horrible way to die. He'd just met with the first one to turn around, Spartan 249, when the Flood caught up again, this time ripping them both from their feet and attempting to claw their armor open. The Spartan was better equipped to handle that sort of thing, being in a suit good enough to be dropped straight into vacuum, but Soulguard was not â€" he wasn't even wearing a filter so he didn't breathe any loose spores. Between the writhing masses of combat forms, an infection form wriggled down, hunting for prey.

Spartan 249 blew a spike grenade against his gauntlet, directing most of the blast away and clearing much of their Flood canopy away. But the infection form remained, and even as Soulguard swatted away the nearest combat form in order to rise, the small, bulbous thing made

contact, and latched on. 249 hauled the Councilor from the mess as it was held at bay temporarily by the last of everyone else's ammo by an arm, even as he realized there was an infection form stabbing through the armor plates on the Councilor's back, demanding entrance.

He stuck his hand up under the mouth of the creature and plucked upwards, freeing it from it's grasp of Soulguard's back, but the action caused the spear-like penetrator to shoot through the middle of his hand, out the other side. He let go of the Councilor even as he had just gained his feet, collapsing to his own knees as he pried at the bug digging at his hand expecting to find brain matter, even as the fires of a million torments branched up the inside of his arm and across his shoulder. Seeing the Spartan's distress, Soulguard smashed the infection form between spread palms, plucked the penetrator out of the Human's hand, and hauled him back to his feet before dragging him along towards their original escape route. One by one, the others followed, as they ran dry of ammo.

When the last ally had passed the choke point, Lai Tasha activated the quarter-domed convex Deployable Cover device right in the middle of the hole, and braced the base with a brick as big as he was before turning and following his brothers.

Like waves crashing against a dam, the Flood slammed into the impassible field, and fell back, retreating along another, longer route.

****Scene Twenty-seven **_**Luminous Serenade**_**

The message was history. Not that the signal had been blocked; for some stupid reason beyond sanity the Brutes had decided to release the one creature upon him he knew as well as they that he could never meet on even grounds. Not unless it was already dead.

Damn them all, and curse their young for generations to come! Warbirds had done the only thing any sane Elite would have; run. There was no question about it, no one warrior could face a Sharquoi by himself and beat it. But the thing was after him, now, and right when he'd almost had the whole thing under control! He'd almost had the shipâ€ and then they had to pull some nonsense like this! What atrocityâ€ this was hardly fighting fair, after all he'd only begun this fight with his bare hide. They couldn't show the decency to meet that on equal terms, noâ€ no, no. They had unleashed their dumb pet on him, and sent him running like some juvenile Grunt without a parent to flee to. He hurt all over from the beating he'd gotten from that Captain, still, and little nicks and bruises here and there from a lucky few others who had managed to nail him once before dying, but this! Even on his good day, Warbirds was not good enough to meet or match a Sharquoi. No, there was not going to be any showdown.

The creature's roar filled his ears and made them ring for a moment as he dropped into a quick roll to avoid being swiped from his feet, before coming back to them and resuming his run. He was barely ahead of the thing, limping along like he owed someone something. In fact, he'd begun to wonder if he hadn't fractured one of his legs pretty good, near to breaking it, at one point, as the more he used it the more it hurt, until he'd been driven past really being able to feel it at all. Now it was a numb throb, spiking noticeably each time that hoof hit the floor. And the closer that thing got, the faster he pedaled and the more often that hoof hit the floor â€ and the more

times it hit, the faster the buildup of crippling pain in that leg. He wondered if he could even make it before he fell, screaming, unable to go on and then suddenly dying as Sharquoi food.

In all honesty he really didn't know if Sharquoi could eat Sangheili, but he wasn't one to explore such scientific facts when he was the so mentioned Sangheili in the dish to be served. That he might die without chance to fight caused bile to rise into his throat, but he was in no way shape or form going to allow any such thing as long as it still remained to him an option to choose.

Despite the waves of debilitating pain, he ran on; the gravity lift chamber was just aheadâ€¦ wasn't it? He hung a quick right, changed his mind and darted back left again, sliding under the Sharquoi and confusing it for a moment as it tried to follow his logic, adding some distance â€" and comfort â€" between them when it turned and resumed its dogged pursuit. Warbirds took to heart the fact that he could no longer feel its hot breath on his neck, and pressed on, barreling past a Brute that had just opened that far door somehow in the nick of time so Warbirds didn't need to slow downâ€¦ the Sharquoi just roared, smashing the Brute beneath a broad foot and smearing it across the floor for the next six or eight strides, stringing ligaments and tendons along between prints, all that remained of the creature being a few printed shapes of a Sharquoi foot on the floor in a random hall somewhere gods only knew where on this gods-forsaken cruiser.

Warbirds was about out of breath and up to his eyeballs in agony; he was nearing his limit of tolerance and he knew it, running all the words in his mind together as he fought to keep breathing, struggled to keep running; key signs on bulkhead doors he was passing gave him hope; yes, he was almost there. He lowered his head and pushed into his pace, willing himself farther along, just a few feet more, just a few feet moreâ€¦ before he collapsed. He hit the last door to the chamber, and for some reason it refused to open for him. He slammed a fist into it, screaming more in fury at so disgraceful a defeat as to suffer, and a heartbeat later, the Sharquoi slammed hard into it too, behind him. He sank to his knees, exhausted, and in too much pain to care anymore, but he knew better than to leave the beast whole â€" maybe it had a bruise â€" for his brothers to find. He lit a sword, and swung feebly at the thing, but it was nigh heaped on top of him, pinning most of him down, and it had not yet gathered itself up or regained its wits, so the swing, however feeble, did do as much damage as it might; however, it sped up the reset time the Sharquoi was taking, and it recoiled from him, hissing, to gather up its mass and rear up for a strike at him that would undoubtedly end him.

Warbirds faced it squarely, unafraid to stare his death in the eyeâ€¦ oh, how big those teeth must be. The world fell out from under him, suddenly, and unexpectedly, leaving him sprawled off his balance and within a sense of vertigo where for a moment he wasn't quite sure which way was upâ€¦ but in front of him, the Sharquoi sailed past, extended fully as if expecting to have stopped some time backâ€¦ rolling over to his stomach, Warbirds realized he was laying across the threshold of the door he'd been leaned against. He laughed, thrilled suddenly to be alive, and by such a small grace! The sensors in the door had not been quick enough for his adrenalin-heightened senses, and it had opened in the standard timed sequence; which had somehow correlated to the exact time the Sharquoi had chosen to bite

him in half.

With the beast ahead of him and as confused about what had just happened " it seemed so sudden " as he had been a moment ago, Warbirds clawed at the floor, fighting to his hooves towards the lift pad in the center of the room. He had to get there before it did " and before it realized he had not, in fact, simply vanished from sight.

He punched in the access codes so his claws perforated the rubber button tops, but he recoiled onto the pad in time to turn and see the Sharquoi turn around and look at him, its ugly face contorting into a growl right before the lift opened, so the sound followed him down but posed no threats. The beast couldn't work the device; even if it knew how, and wasn't so blind with rage, it didn't possess small enough digits to do more than smash the code pad trying.

Unless it used its tongue" and that was supposing said appendage was that dexterous. Warbirds laughed up at it the whole way down to the grav plate planted in the soil of the moon where the Mirrator'd had had their base, but once there, he had to contemplate the newest predicament he'd just gotten himself into. He was completely surrounded by Brutes and Jackals, although the panic-prone Grunts were nowhere in sight and there didn't immediately appear to be any Hunters about.

Yet.

They all roared at him at once, sitting there in their epicenter, and opened fire all at once. Camouflage in this situation was as useless as with the Sharquoi, although for different reasons. He limped as fast as he could from their center, ducking as much of the fire as he could, and hoped they were hitting one another. Now his leg was on so much fire he wondered if he would be better off without it, but for the moment he had more pressing matters to attend than whacking off one of his own limbs. First he stole a fuel rod cannon, and strafed his retreat path with it, then hosed the rest of them with the last of the ammo in the clip before diving into a broken hole in the side of a building. He crawled from the entrance into a dark corner, feeling every ache he'd ever gained, and sat there silent wondering why they weren't coming in after him.

Fear of sharing Aardvark's fate made him move again, deeper through, out the other side of the building he suddenly no longer trusted to remain standing. If the Covenant didn't want to go in there, why should he? But right as he'd gained a knee and was about to stand up to the best of his ability, he scented a most foul stench in the mostly still air. For reasons unknown, gravity lifts tended to kill wind currents to within about a hundred yards" he knew Acetylcholine could have told him why, and probably off the top of his head, but for right now all the scientific facts really just boiled down to one specific important fact; if the smell was there, and the wind wasn't blowing, then the source of the smell was there, too.

And he didn't even get enough time to consider any memory attributed to said scent before it was explained to him in gross detail. Staring back through the hole in the shelled out building, he saw a great army of Flood forms, pouring over the far side of the opened area where the cruiser had dropped it's grav plate. From there, and amid a

shooting war, the Flood took over the entire place. Warbirds slunk towards the darkest corner he could see in the dim street he was in, and activated his cloak. Maybe he'd be missed â€" maybe the Flood that ate the Covenant forces who had seen him wouldn't care or wouldn't mind, and would leave him aloneâ€" content with the food directly at hand.

He felt repulsed and sick to his stomach by the idea, but he knew inwardly it was only by grace of the Flood's timing that he had been spared another big, nasty, unevenly matched fight where he didn't have any real weapons â€" his swords had both died for lack of battery a while back â€" and absolutely no backup.

Still, grateful was grateful, and alone and ignored in a dark recess of shadows, Warbirds understood that regardless of whom to or even why, he was, in fact, grateful to the Flood for coming when they had. No parasitical plague had ever entertained better timing, he was sure of it. Leaning back and taking his first calm breath in over twelve hours, Warbirds smiled at the burnt orange, reddening sky.

Yesâ€" it was good to be alive.

****Scene Twenty-eight **_**Getting A Bigger Hammer**_**

The very top edge of the sun was peeking over the horizon between buildings, but the light was grey, at best, shading everything in stark blacks and whites that would eventually turn mostly twilight before brightening to colors beyond the grey spectrum. Acetylcholine had seen prettier sunrises. The clouds of spores in the air had grown somehow, and left it with a sickly green pallor rather than the initial red star glow it had had a few hours before. But then, that was Flood â€" needing mere hours to work their filthy magic on an environment, consuming all.

Luckily, the ecosystem on this moon was minimal at best, surviving with insects, small rodents and plant life. Still, despite his overtly analytical mind, Acetylcholine found it surprisingly hard to focus on such monumentally mundane things at this time; it helped none at all that he hadn't seen another truly living soul spare the ones he'd not let out of his sight â€" be they enemy or otherwise â€" in over seven hours. It was a little distressing, truth be told, even as he knew beyond doubts that the Mirrator's death toll had to be small â€" he hadn't seen a Flood combat form yet that wasn't wrought of a Brute's carcass. Jackals and Grunts didn't tend to turn into combat forms, although he had seen just one of those â€" and while admittedly a fascinating find, he'd just had to chop it down like the rest without sparing a moment to contemplate.

Maybe it had just been a particularly big one, or something. Infection forms swam between the flying legs and feet, more often being stomped flat by their own charging constituents than the Mirrator members fleeing the sight of them. Acetyl turned down the corridor on the left without slowing, but the Flood forms had caught up, and he had to slam an elbow into the one clawing at his side to upset its pace. It stumbled, but wouldn't have fallen down if it had not been pressed there by the pushing and shoving of all the others that wanted to eat them just as badly.

Groping across the myriad items on his equipment belt, Acetylcholine pulled his rarely-used swords out and charged them on; the next Flood

to shoulder into him got the short end of that stick, and splattered across floor and wall in pieces as it too was trampled. "Faster, don't slow down!" He complained, calling ahead to the others. "Go faster, go faster! They've caught up!"

"Which way now? I see another juncture, and straight ends!" The leading warrior called back, over his shoulder.

"Should be a left!" Ace responded. "Is there a left?"

"I don't know! We're about to find out!" Maestro hit the juncture and spun, taking in all angles in a breath before calling back. "It's blocked! Is right acceptable?"

"Take it anyway!" Acetylcholine snarled, annoyed. That was the second detour they'd be needing to make, and it was cutting into their time. So far the amount of local territory available that wasn't overgrown with Flood infestation was grown small, and their destination lay more outside that perimeter. "Do you see any other passages that go left?"

"Not here! I see another potential path up ahead, if it isn't blocked, too!" Maestro called back.

Between them, Flyer and Tejan shared a look. Things were not boding well. Tejan motioned over his shoulder as the sound of yet another splattering corpse reached them, and Flyer motioned back, signing his own thoughts. As one the pair spun on their heels and braced, so the unsuspecting Acetylcholine shot between them and the Flood at his elbows slammed headlong into the two he'd just passed right by. Throwing back the Flood, the pair dropped each a grenade before turning back and fleeing before the stumbled and stopped Flood advance could pick itself up. The first six got going again, though, before detonation, and were left alone in the lead while the gap between them and those behind them widened as the stunned remnants staggered along at a slower pace.

Ace turned partway and ran at an odd angle as he looked behind him, unsure what had just happened, but all he saw was Flyer and Tejan racing after him, and a drastically reduced Flood horde after them. Straightening, he pressed on, making his best time to catch up with Maestro, who had somehow gotten farther ahead of them all. He realized this right as Ace did, though, when he paused to survey the next juncture, and he spared them a look from where he was as they raced towards him. He waved at them, then shouldered his carbine and aimed past them — almost in unison, all three split off from the middle and took to the sides of the hall they were in, flinching instinctually for each shot that zipped past their heads at the Flood chasing them.

Acetyl caught up first, but paused only long enough to decide which way from where they were before continuing, Flyer and Tejan hot on his heels. As the last Flood of the forward six crumpled in defeat, Maestro turned to follow, but he only got the first running step taken before he realized what that sudden whine he was hearing was; and then the rocket slammed hard into the wall at the end of the corridor they had just vacated, but he wasn't far enough away from it to escape the destruction it wrought. Slammed into the opposite wall and then tumbled from his hooves, Maestro threw his carbine across his back before clawing for purchase, well knowing even Mirratord

augmented shielding couldn't protect him from a barrage of rocketsâ€| but the next thing that hit wasn't a rocket. It was hotter and with less substance; which implied heavily that the wielders had gotten into both heavy weapons lockers, not just one or the other.

The next fuel rod came from much closer, and even though Maestro had managed to scramble to his hands and knees for the first six feet, he was still blown flat yet again by the concussion blast the rod generated upon passage and then impact. Coughing now on the shredded materials the wall had been made of, Maestro kicked to his hooves and this time made it to the end of the hall he was in now before needing to duck the next shot taken. He didn't quite make the corner, though, when a second hit squarely in his side, smashing him against that wall â€" which was unfortunately braced rather well â€" and stalling all his momentum.

Maestro crumpled, gagging after having all the breath blasted from him, and sure he'd felt a rib crack. Flyer appeared out of the rising blossom of dust and grit that filled the air each time a rod or rocket hit, and grabbed him by his shoulders, dragging him up and away, but still not fast enough â€" Flyer caught the full brunt of the next shot, but the one following it missed them both cleanly â€" and while Flyer's shielding was majorly dented, it held, and spared him any injury excepting perhaps debris inhalation. Maestro, however, despite being only collaterally involved, got most of the hurt for his trouble. Sandwiched between blasts of electro-charged plasma and rocket shrapnel, he felt rather lucky to be in one pieceâ€| but he still had the strength to shove Flyer brutally away and then follow him before the next rocket hit, this one spraying them more or less harmlessly with rubble from an already deeply dug hole in the surprisingly resilient wall. Flyer took charge from there, though, dragging Maestro back to his hooves and pulling him along at a hobbled run until Tejan met them and took Maestro's other elbow, adding to their speed. Ace resumed his place in the rear, well aware the three ahead would need all the time they could get to rearrange what they were holding if the Flood behind them caught up again.

Especially so now since they seemed to have unburied the heavy weapons' brigade. Acetylcholine kept an eye over his shoulder and one ahead as they moved hastily along, wary of the settling dust cloud at the end of the corridor, hoping quietly that the Flood were about out of ammunition for those things. More so, since they appeared more than willing to apply their use liberally. He turned completely around and trotted backwards while aiming his plasma rifles when the first Flood form appeared through the drifting clouds, pasting the front rank and cooking it off at the waist even as more from behind them appeared to take their place. Despite trying to mediate between rifles, he began to despair when he realized they were heating up faster than they were cooling off, and the Flood didn't seem to care. Finally, the caps popped and steam hissed off the coils, leaving Ace unable to fire them anymore until they had released enough heat. Their function was now as great as that of a billy club, and he had absolutely no wish to allow the Flood to get that close.

Bores as big as his arms appeared over deformed Flood shoulders, alongside sharply aglow stacks of cannon rounds. "Down!" Acetyl cried, well aware there was no left or right cover to be had â€" not here. The first volley sizzled by over their hunkered heads harmlessly, but after that, they started hitting the floor at their

feet, and by the time they had reached the end of the hall, even Acetyl had run out of shielding " and by far as much of patience. He roared at the disfigured and rotting Brutes hobbling towards them, their calcite claws swaying at their sides like detached accessories while their more or less unchanged arm held tightly to a weapon that should in truth have taken two hands to hold.

He poured plasma across their faces, and this time when the rifles overheated, he threw one at them, knocking one of the aimed cannons aside so it went off right into the thigh of the Flood form beside it, and began to dig at his overcrowded equipment belt, looking for something that wasn't some form of scientific tool. There were standard issue items in there, somewhere, he was sure, but they had been buried rather deep. Finding a grenade beneath a pouch reserved for near microscopic nuts used to secure the injection nodes inside the back of an armored vest, he yanked it out, simultaneously snapping the pouch open and spraying the nuts all over the floor " and like a sea of beads, the Flood that stepped upon them slid and crashed in unceremonious heaps across one another onto the floor.

While saddened to see such a horrendous mess made of such small pieces of vitally necessary equipment, Acetylcholine found himself grateful for the spill considering its' consequences. Plucking the activator switch, he flung the grenade into their midst, and left them to it " this time, none got past before it all went up in shreds and flames.

Turning, he realized the other three had gotten way ahead of him, and unfortunately had chosen the wrong one of two available passages. Racing ahead to try to catch them and stop them, Acetyl reached shouting distance right as Flyer kicked open an exterior door, sending the meager barrier flying in the faces of a virtual sea of mangled and idle Flood forms. Here there were not just combat forms " and even as Flyer recoiled in horror at the sheer numbers of them all, a carrier form did a face-plant at his feet, and began to swell as the infection forms inside its bloated gestation sac sought open air; generally this was an explosive reaction, based in chemical and pressure related areas, but for the moment all that mattered was that it was going to pop spectacularly and right under poor Flyer.

Acetylcholine snatched a hook reel from his belt, slung the firing pin outwards as he hit the disengaging switch, and when the hook embedded in the back of Flyer's shoulder, he snapped his arm back, triggering the reel as he did so. Flyer was snatched right out of the arms of a rushing combat form, and away fast enough so he also missed being harmed any by the explosion rendered by the bloating carrier form. He landed rather hard on his rump, though, which later Acetyl considered might have wounded his tailbone some, but in retrospect such things could be seen to " reviving the dead was something no one could do.

However, the hand-held device wasn't strong enough to reel the other warrior in after he'd hit the floor and begun to generate drag and resistance, and the punch hook bolt wasn't responding well in tests " which meant if Acetyl meant any kind of good time he'd need to skip the disengaging switch for the hook release and do that part manually. Reaching Flyer's side, he plucked the hook bolt from his armor, and let the cable reel in before reattaching it to his belt

and pulling Flyer to his hooves again. Tejan had already gotten Maestro started in the other direction, giving them a clear shot back the way they should have gone in the first place, without needing to wait much for their slowed companion.

"What the hell??" Flyer was asking, stunned still after flying backwards for no reason he could discern.

"Just go!" Ace commanded. "I'll explain later!" Following Flyer, Ace looked with a frown at the punch hole in the pilot's armor and wondered if he hadn't just made a custom hole for a Flood form's injector. Hopefully, the infection forms would never get that close.

Ahead, the corridor ended in a domed chamber without doors. But what it did have was decorative stone archways where each corridor met the chamber. Acetyl looked down at his belt again, searching. "Flyer, do you have anything especially explosive or volatile on you?"

"What? No! Why? What did you have in mind?" Flyer asked.

"See those arches? I need to bring this one down, and in such a manner that it will completely block this passage off."

"Oh. No, sorry â€" I have one spike grenade, and that's all." Flyer reported. "You'd need somethingâ€| biggerâ€| a t37PR ought to do it. Do you have any of those?"

"Those silly little explosive neck-sized hoops? No. But you're right."

"Shame they were developed for suicide." Flyer mentioned, before he realized he was looking at one â€" and it was on Maestro's belt next to his sidearm. "Maestro! Toss me that ring!"

The explosive device flipped in the air between parties and exchanged hands to Acetyl's, who set the timer and primed it. Reaching the passage end, he slid to a stop as Flyer kept going, carefully placed the thing in a strategic location so it ought to do as intended, then fled the sight of it, owning no wish to die with the Flood the hall was about to fall in on. The blast wave caught up with them despite their haste, though, as the t37PR devices held a documented blast radius of ten kilometersâ€| added to this was much of the output was funneled, concentrating the forces involved and expanding the radius as a result.

The structure collapsed around the device, but it had been well built and hadn't done as much crumbling as some of the other structures, so while it pelted the four warriors unmercifully, knocking them flat and then burying them in an ankle-deep sea of grit and pebbles with the occasional bigger piece of stone or mortar, they were neither killed nor trapped under more than sixteen tons of building material.

Acetylcholine pulled his hands from his head and looked around, wishing he still had his helmet. He sorely missed his vest, too, now that he thought about it, but hardly any of them still wore much in the way of armor â€" that Flyer still had a vest was of some note, but it was next to all he had.

"Is everyone alright?" Flyer asked, sifting through the rubble for something. Finding his guns, he reaffixed them to his hips.

"Tejan?"

Ace watched as the quiet one sat up from his protected hunch and looked over at them, before shaking his head. "If that's not the end, it soon will be." He swept a hand over Maestro, cleaning off much of the gravel and revealing the true nature of his injuries. It was painfully clear to Acetyl that had he had his armor on, it would be half as severeâ€| but as it were, they all could have fared much better if better prepared. Acetyl felt horrible for throwing the acid at the Hunter, then, but hindsight would fix nothing. He turned to see Flyer, wondering what to say and feeling slightly at fault for their collective conditions.

"I need a ship. If I just had a ship." Flyer griped.

****Scene Twenty-nine **_**For Hell Hath No Fury**_**

"Damn the connection is bad here." Kuro took the bug from her ear and looked at it in disdain. "Could hardly hear him."

"Wellâ€|" Evilkitty began, but paused to wait for the rippling thunder overhead to pass before finishing. "I don't knowâ€| maybe it's the lightning, messing up the reception."

"Are we close?" Aardvark begged, gasping for air.

"No, we're not close, please stop asking that." Evilkitty pleaded, shaking her upturned hands at the bard.

"Evilkitty, that's the only time she's asked anything at all in over three hours." Kuro protested. "What ever are you complaining about?"

"That was the same thing she asked, those three hours ago." Evilkitty responded. "I was trying to keep it from getting to the annoying stage of development."

"I'll annoy something." Aardvark muttered, still wheezing.

Kuro heaved a weary sigh. "Come on, I've a feeling something is drawing close â€" and there's a lot of whatever it is, possibly more New Covenant forces."

"Can we get around them at all?" Evilkitty asked, pulling Aardvark back to her hooves and holding her there while she wavered. "I don't know if we can handle another fight."

"I don't think so." Kuro said, moving forward. "Seems somehow like something we'd be better off notâ€| passing up."

"Like what?" Evilkitty insisted, pressing for more information. It reminded Aardvark how she acted while inside an interrogation chamber â€" never satisfied with a vague answer. The city opened up not far ahead, where the street turned into a courtyard with a reflection pool in the center, and cemented pots where trees had once stood around the edges. Bits of brick and mortar and some odd miscellaneous items littered the ground, but here the cobblestones themselves had not been broken, and between drifts of debris the going was smooth

enough.

Kuro made the last corner and leaned around, peering at all the lightening dark areas as the storm tried to limit the blue dwarf's golden rays. Tiny droplets of moisture still pattered across the city like mistfall, but it was no more severe than mere high humidityâ€| spare that it was more direct and a lot colder.

Seeing the place was empty, she stepped out, but immediately that she did, a carbine round zinged off her shoulder guard, and sent her reeling back behind the cover of the corner. Evilkitty engaged her camouflage and darted past it to the next available cover, before swiftly zig-zagging her way between chunks of building and set partitions in the courtyard to get closer to their perceived enemy and gauge their number.

What she ultimately found, though, surprised her a little, as she stepped up a short stair and turned around the shooter's cover. The contact points on her plasma rifle smacked against the narrow end of the barrel of the carbine as it swung up to meet her position, so she batted it away as she hit the control on her camouflage again. The Elite staring back at her gave a start, then lowered his carbine.

"You." He said, as if having expected her personally.

"Me?" Evilkitty asked, speculative.

"I'm sorry â€" there's just so much Flood in this part of the city, that Iâ€| we radioed out and no one responded, so we assumed no one was nearbyâ€| "

"Wait, waitâ€| we?"

"Yes, there are eleven of us together. We made contact with another group â€" of thirty four â€" over on the west side, about an hour ago. Said something about hearing the Admiral on the comm lines talking about taking the ship."

"Yeah, we told him to." Evilkitty said. "That's where we're going. This place is a lost cause, what with the Flood's introduction and all. We can't stay here. There's no sterilizing the Flood, they're too stubborn."

He nodded, rising from his crouched position. Touching his ear with a finger, he added, "Clear, move up."

"You should look before you shoot, by the way." Evilkitty mentioned, as she turned away. "Next time you might get unlucky enough to actually _kill_ what you hit, and I doubt the Admiral would be too pleased to learn you had murdered his mate." She was already several paces away, but she still heard the terrified noise the officer made behind her, and she smiled as she waved Kuro out from the corner. "They're ours."

"Lone?" Aardvark asked, pressing to the corner to see around. "He'sâ€| not with them, is he?" She sighed, disappointed, as she watched the other party file through and into the courtyard.

"You're obsessed." Evilkitty remarked, but before she could complete

her partial turn to look over at Kuro, she was smacked upside the head and laid out flat by the sudden and powerful blow. Stunned more than hurt, Evilkitty propped herself up on her elbows and played a hand over the burning area on the side of her face. "Did you just [i_hit_ [/i me??"

Half-bent with her good arm wrapped around her middle as though it hurt rather badly, Aardvark nodded "€" past a peeved expression.

"I think I know why someone's still alive" Kuro muttered, under her breath. "Doesn't know when she's beat."

"Oh, hush." Evilkitty rolled to her hooves, and after a moment of considering hitting back, turned away instead. "She should just be glad I've the good grace not to give that one back to her."

"Try it." Aardvark challenged. "I'll make you sorry."

"Like that? I don't think so. You cant even stand up straight." Kuro told her. "Now calm down, both of you, we're all friends here."

"I never said she wasn't my friend." Aardvark pointed out. "But she got what was coming to her for being so sarcastic" and demented."

"Hey!" Evilkitty protested.

"Told you I'd get you back when you least expected it." Aardvark laughed, the sound strained at best as her face pinched together in an effort to maintain her stance. "What are girlfriends for, huh?"

Evilkitty grumbled something that wasn't the same language "€" if it was indeed in a true language at all "€" and stalked away, rifle in hand. Kuro stepped up to one of the new arrivals, and looked him over. "How much Flood have you seen?"

"More than I like to." He answered, simply.

"Which direction did you come through?"

He turned, and pointed. "More or less that direction, if one can keep one's way at all straight in a city like this one."

"Fair enough." Kuro said. "We are making towards the cruiser, but we have wounded" the Admiral and the Councilors are going to meet us there with what remains of the Strike Team."

"What remains of?"

"Warbirds, Wildfire, and Aardvark have all fallen "€" as of now Aardvark is the only one I know for sure isn't dead for the trouble." Kuro answered. "Things were rough at the start, and more than a few of us barely escaped with our lives before the fighting settled down."

"I see." He waved at the Mirrator with him, assembling and dispersing them in a cohesive manner. "The Flood are pursuing us. We should keep moving." Stepping past her to the wall upon which Aardvark leaned, he lifted her from it and carried her down the

street the team had chosen that would most likely serve as their route to the ship. Kuro followed, well aware Evilkitty would catch up later as she saw fit to, when her sulking scout of the perimeter was finished. Making their way through the city proper proved hazardous at best, as almost as soon as the two groups had arrived at the next juncture together then they were again assailed by more scattered Flood.

The front rank of seven " which somehow included Evilkitty, though how she had gotten out in front was a mystery to Kuro " managed to hold them off fairly well enough until the last of them had dropped, but the sound of the shootout had attracted more, and they were on their way. As one, the group began to run, pacing themselves but not being slow either, in an attempt to outpace the Flood that had not yet caught up with them. Sounds of Flood forms snarling and gurgling behind and at their flanks drove them to slightly faster speeds, at times the posse cloaking as one and making for short spans where nothing would have known they were there at all.

Twilight began to lift, as the back edge of the storm arrived on the horizon, but lightning still crackled directly above them. Color-stained clouds drifted overhead in slow repose as if foretelling some odd circumstance that was long past overdue, yet the cruiser above them parted them just the same, even as the first rays of probing light touched down over the city ruin. Finally, when the purple streak signaling their arrival at the gravity lift came into better view, the previously almost dormant Flood fell upon them in greater hordes than previously seen, as the parasites had been gathering and ascending the lift beam for the past couple of hours undisturbed.

Evilkitty got off the first shot, being in front, and it blew the top right off the combat form she'd aimed at. Fire exchanged in blinding rates of exchange, but even as the sides wove and dodged between and through the half-crumbled structures, the Mirrator only suffered temporary inability to see past their augmented shielding when it was hammered with such consistency that it became opaque. Kuro stood up suddenly in the middle of it all and let fly with a cannon she had swiped from a fallen Flood form, pasting the ranks of parasitical enemy with reckless abandon. Across the lift platform, more Flood poured up the sides and across it at them, but she burned holes through the claw like latching mechanisms of the platform that had at one point held it to the ship, and seared those off at the shoulders too.

Her cry of defiance reached where Aardvark had been told to stay in the back, and the assassin-bard pried her battered and broken body from the stones to claw a dropped plasma rifle from the ground as she made her way forward. The incredible din from the shooting and yelling of both sides masked her passage, as none could spare any attention to a silent passing. Picking a grenade from her belt, she looked at the rock-dust in the dent on one side before hitting the catch release key anyway and throwing it high over everyone's heads. When it reached its apex, she aimed her plasma rifle and shot it, causing it to prematurely detonate and shower everyone and everything in a fine mist of brilliant plasma fire. It glittered across the Mirrator's shielding, but it also burned fine holes through much of the Flood forms, completely defeating a small crowd of approaching infection heads. Still, it also illuminated what Aardvark had been hoping to see " past the light stain in the upper portion of her

vision, she could see something holding very still, betrayed only by the semi-reflective surface behind its otherwise transparent form.

There was someone there.

Aardvark flipped her camouflage engine on, but the Flood that had come her way still had to be swatted away with a crushing blow from her rifle before it was deterred enough to bother someone else. Dodging flying munitions from all angles, Aardvark crawled on her belly over the last few hundred yards as cannon rounds and rockets sizzled overhead. Lifting to her knees behind the last cover before reaching that hiding place, she took a second grenade and threw it into the hole, but she didn't light its fuse first. When she heard the alarmed scratching of recognition of the device before realization occurred that it was not, in fact, going to blow, she clicked her comm three times.

The response was something she entirely did not expect. "_That came from the lift! They must have reached it â€" yes, I hear gunfire now. Get them up, come on."_ Aardvark looked down at the device, speculatively. Touching the control, she asked,

"Is that you, Admiral?"

"_I am here."_ A different voice answered._ "Is Kuro there with you?"_

"Um." Aardvark gave a small cough, and spent a moment suffering for air before she could continue. "Notâ€| not really, sir. She's doing the fighting."

"_Where are you? We're coming up on the lift platform now."_

"That's where I am." Aardvark responded.

From past her cover came a third voice, astounded. "_Aardvark??_ How did youâ€|?"

She lifted her head, and looked over the rock. "War? That you?"

Warbirds fought with his cloak before it shut off, and he pulled himself out and up far enough to see past his own hiding place to see her. "Aardvark! We thought you were dead. What happened?"

"I'd be a little more inclined to beat the living daylights out of all of you for leaving me behind." Aardvark said, irritably. "I was most assuredly not dead." She inhaled to speak further, but coughed it out instead.

"Hey." Warbirds moved closer, and took her shoulder. "Easy, you're wounded."

"So are you." Aardvark pushed his hand off. "I've been carried far enough. I'll live."

"I don't know about that." He touched the side of her mandibles, then held his hand up so she could see. "You're coughing up your own blood, Aardvark."

She wiped it away. "Better than drowning in it." She rasped. "The others need help. Find a gun and start shooting." She pointed back the way she had come. Warbirds looked, but what caught his attention through all the mess was the one form moving through the rest.

A Flood Pure form.

His gut wrenched in despair, then he cringed in pain when it affected his injury. "Damn them all."

Behind him, a familiar voice spoke. "Forerunners! Admiral, it's Aardvark!"

****Scene Thirty **_**Rich Man, Poor Man, Beggar Man, Thief**_**

He was shaking, now. Evil almost couldn't keep him off the ground, until 09 grabbed his other elbow and helped to hold him up. Hot blood dripped continuously from the small puncture through the palm of his hand, the wound refusing to close or heal. At times the plasma leaking from the backside opposite where the blood was flowing out would turn a sickly green color, but then it would clear again.

Despite the almost insignificance of the small injury, it was about near to ending him â€" Spartan 249 had gotten Flood spores into his bloodstream, and the chemical reaction his body was enduring was unkind to normal motor function at best. If he survived much longer without medical help, he would be the first one in history. That he was doing as well as he was was something of a miracle, in that he had not yet started to become Flood himself. For the most part, though, he was hardly what he had used to be â€" dragging, weak and shivering uncontrollably, the Spartan was little better than a small child as far as usefulness went, but his companions clung to his arms anyway, determined to deliver him to safety where his problems could be better addressed.

Out ahead, Aozora pushed through a mostly broken wall to make a passage through otherwise blocked off areas, and stepped out with the falling masonry to meet the muzzle of not one but three separate guns â€" one carbine, and two t25DERs. He stopped short, and looked at each before looking past them at their wielders. Mirratord. He sighed, and relaxed. "How many are you?"

The weapons lowered. "You should learn to knock, Admiral." The one on the left said, as the one on the right provided a more comprehensive answer.

"More than enough. I haven't counted, but you're the fifth arrival to show up so far."

"How many is that? A dozen? Two?" Aozora pressed. "We're taking the ship and getting off this moon. I need more than just some of us, warrior, I want all of us up there when I kick the engines."

"Sir." He turned away, and his retreat from Aozora's entrance allowed the Admiral to see more than a lot of Flood forms heaped here and there among the hooves of at least three dozen Mirratord. Three looked to be badly hurting, but as Lai stepped through the hole in the wall behind Aozora, he noted also that the others, while some of

them seemed battered, all appeared battleworthy for the most part. It was heartening, to see so many had gotten past the Flood and the Brutes and been able to join up in such numbers.

Soulguard pushed past Lai, noncomprehending why the other Councilor had stopped in the middle of the way, but he too paused once outside the wall. Looking back through it, he motioned at the trailing members of their party, and the ailing Spartan was brought forward more quickly since now their rear had become the more dangerous angle to be caught at. Many of the Elites started at his pitiful condition, and one even backed away from him in ware. Evil let him rest more or less on top of a fallen square pylon, but he had to hold him there to keep him from falling off of it again.

"What happened to him?" One of the others asked.

"Flood." Evil sighed. "If he starts to turn, he's dead. But for some reason, he isn't. I don't know why, but if he's inclined to survive this, I'm willing to let him."

"No one is immune to the Flood." Came a protest. "No one and nothing. He'll turn, just like all the rest â€" you're only letting him suffer! It's not our way."

"Enough!" Soulguard snapped. "Leave them alone. We have greater problems to attend at this time."

The first returned, then, and relayed what he had learned. "Admiral. We are fifty two."

"Fifty two? Combined, now? Or before our arrival?" Aozora asked.

"That includes you, and those two Councilors." He answered. "No one else."

"Fair enough." Aozora inhaled, and looked at them all. "Can you move suitably?"

"Fast enough so far that the Flood have not caught us."

"Good, let's move." He motioned towards the injured. "We leave no one behind â€" they would only become food for the Flood."

Lai Tasha began adjusting his comn frequency as he walked, following Aozora and nearly elbow-to-elbow with Omega. When he heard a triple click, he hesitated. Then he checked the calibration, and nearly choked. "That came from the lift!" He looked over at his fellow Councilor, before some of the background drumming crackled through. "They must have reached it â€" yes, I hear gunfire now. Get them up, come on." He urged, trying to make them all move faster.

A voice from the echoes of the past responded; _"Is that you, Admiral?"_

Lai Tasha reached up, and caught Aozora, before handing him his comn. The Admiral placed it in his ear, wondering who he would be speaking with. Gauging by what Lai had already said, though, he had a vague idea who to assume it could be. "I am here. Is Kuro there with you?"

The responding voice was both strained and hoarse, but clear enough, mercifully, as the storm's passage was dimming its effect on their comn lines, especially over shorter distances. _"Um."_ Aozora winced as he heard the speaker begin to cough, each strained inhalation sounding liquid. _"Notâ€| not really, sir. She's doing the fighting."_

Aozora took a quick survey of their fast approaching destination, already able to better hear the shooting without needing the comn to amplify it. "Where are you? We're coming up on the lift platform now."

"_That's where I am."_ Came the response.

Aozora looked back at Lai Tasha, wondering who he was speaking with, but the comn faded into mostly background noises and static, so he gave it back.

"What did she say?"

"They're at the lift now. And apparently the Brutes are really determined not to let us have it."

"Nothing else?"

He shook his head, focusing forward. The posse assembled so the battle-ready were in front, as they charged ahead into the clearing that was the lift platform's accommodation. The fight could be clearly seen now, and even as they arrived at their edge, and saw a great number more of their own than they expected to, another group fell over the far wall and charged straight into the fray from out of nowhere.

Heartened at the sight of so many of their own, the Councilors pressed forward, much of their accompaniment hot on their heels. Aozora was about to follow their charge when 09 caught his arm and brought him to a sudden halt. "Forerunners! Admiral, it's Aardvark!"

Shocked into realization, he twisted around the Spartan to see what he thought he was talking about. Sure enough, crumpled there against a loosed corner stone was the bard â€" and beside her, verily holding her up, Warbirds.

"You'reâ€|" Aozora stammered, at a loss. "â€|both of youâ€|?"

"Admiral." Warbirds nodded to him. "Good to see you again. I don't know how this battle with the Flood will treat us, but you need to make everyone aware of something before they try to take the ship."

"Aware?" Aozora squatted, and touched Aardvark's head. "Is she alive?"

"Yesâ€|" Warbirds sighed. "But she broke something inside. She's fading, Admiral. But listen." He grabbed the Admiral's shoulder to regain his attention. "Don't let them find the Sharquoi without first knowing it is there."

Aozora gave a start as his brain came back online. "A
what?!"

Warbirds didn't get to answer as another voice deeper into the fighting called Aozora's name. He turned, and then left, running to meet the fight head-on. The first several Flood forms he met died without hesitation, but when he came into contact with the pure form, it didn't collapse under his onslaught the same way the others had. He spared it a second look, then, curious as to why.

Lai Tasha threw down one of the larger former Brutes, and it splashed into several pieces even as the infection form inside scrambled to escape. It died in a puff of fragments under the Councilor's hoof, though, even as the last of the battle died out with the sudden lack of live enemy to slay. Aozora caught Kuro in his arms, thankful she was whole, then proceeded to survey the masses of Mirratord gathered at the base of the ship. He spared a look up at it, then motioned more than half the available forces toward the lift.

"Watch for a Sharquoi." He told them, even as he trotted to join them. As the lift beam whisked them up into the ship, he found himself toe-to-toe with Soulguard. "Councilor. Hello."

Soulguard just grinned back, as if suddenly very amused. When the ship yawned open around them and they settled into the bay, the expression disappeared almost as fast as it had come. Admiral and Councilor stood in a heartbeat's frozen horror as the very first Mirratord to come in contact with the first enemy was snapped in twain with an agonized scream. Both jolted into action at once, one attacking from one side, the other at the other, and pinching the offending creature in the middle.

The rest of the Mirratord present began firing their guns at the Sharquoi, but it all just seemed to be a soft rain across its tough leathery skin. Soulguard slammed his left hand sword into the beast's shoulder, and it elbowed him into the wall, knocking the wind from him. He dropped to his knees, and rebounded, impacting the beast again even as it dislodged Aozora with a crushing impact between its palm and the floor. The Admiral gagged, the air forced from his chest too fast for it to occupy any sound.

A cluster of three Mirratord were swept aside as the Sharquoi roared, knocking them all into an unceremonious tumble into more of their own. Soulguard caught sight of the pair that didn't rise, but his expert eye told him they had only been knocked senseless for a short time. As the beast turned, though, he spotted Aozora, lying motionless amid a scattered mess of broken armor on the floor. Turning to the Sharquoi, he carved deeper, drowning out its irritation with his anger, punching it back and slamming it down, kicking its legs from beneath it, slicing it to pieces as he went until at last it collapsed in a mutilated heap, the stain of the Flood it had killed oozing with its own blood across the floor.

Soulguard spared it one final roar, before turning his back on it and moving swiftly to the Admiral's side. Kneeling, he touched Aozora's shoulder, trying to discern if the warrior yet lived. A strained cough signaled as much, as his expression drew in to a grimace.

"Ah, good." Soulguard smiled at him. "Whatever you took this morn, I want some."

Aozora spared him a pained laugh, as he clawed his way from the floor. "A breath of clean air."

"You have much repair to do, if you ever expect that GEAR system to work again, my friend." Soulguard clapped a hand at Aozora's elbow, and pulled him back upright. "Come â€" we have the entire ship to secure."

"Iâ€| need a moment." Aozora rasped. "Just to catch my breath."

Below the ship, more of the Mirrator'd gathered to ride the lift up into the belly of the cruiser, assembling in teams of twenty, as much as the lift could hold at one time. Warbirds watched as Spartan 249 was carried up last, walking slowly for his own hurt as he held Aardvark in his arms. She was heavier than she looked, he'd discovered, as despite being rail thin she seemed to weigh almost as much as he thought he did. Which was unusual. Stepping onto the lift, he looked down at her, and heaved a tired sigh.

"Stirb nicht vor mir." He whispered, as his hooves slowly left the platform. "Don't die before I do." He set her down once back aboard, and spent some time calibrating his comn unit before sending his message. "Ah, Councilor, there is something here you must see. I recommend you make hasteâ€| she's fading fast."

****Scene Thirty-one **_**Halls of The Ancestors**_**

The Lone Heretic turned from one collapsed and closed path to investigate another, plowing through the heavy rainfall as he did so. Here, ground mortar and road dust flowed with the colored streams and rivulets, much of it a sickly green color from collected and rinsed Flood spores. On occasion, he'd see a small stripe of red or orange, but they each always led up to fallen New Covenant. He'd seen most of the enemy be caught and turned by their own devices into Flood forms, even when the fighting was brutal. The Brutes here on this moon were beginning to see that they couldn't treat their Grunts like fodder and not expect them to be then fed upon like the term implied. Flood didn't care about ranking structures.

He stepped past the corner of a building and the rainfall let up noticeably. Blinking past the droplets, he peered upward. Ah, he'd come back around, and was touching upon the area beneath the cruiser again. From there, he could see better into the horizon, and noticed for the first time that the sun was up â€" if partially. Ahead, a Flood form snarled and gurgled, swaggering along like it had seen battle already. He extended his arm and shot it with the spike rifle in that hand, uncaring anymore how they fell â€" he'd run out of energy for doing it the dirty way a span back anyhow, and now it was more a matter of extermination than an outlet for his grief or rage. If he let himself slow down, though, he remembered, and then it would hurt all over again. But for as long as there remained enemy to occupy his tired mind, the pain remained in the background, a distant aching throb he could ignore along with all the rest of his aches and pains.

Somewhere off to his left, down a hollow looking street lined by

shelled out structures, he heard the hasty patter of hundreds of feet. Their drumming was almost perfectly masked by the rainfall, but since the direction didn't match where he'd left the rain at, it had to be feet. Exchanging his magazines, Lone stepped down the street, marching determinedly with a need to find this new horde and wipe it all out. He saw the first hint of motion as a rocket, sailing past the far curve into the building ahead of the wave, and bringing said building down as the last it could take.

Lone paused, rifles leveled, and waited. The first thing that tumbled around the corner wasn't Flood, though, and he barely got his fingers off the triggers before he'd pressed them in time to not shoot the fleeing Elites. He started at the leading three — Tejan, enigmatic, quiet, reserved, looking frazzled and frantic. Flyer, cool, calm, collected, the width of his eyes betraying his pure terror. Between them, Maestro. Or what was left of him, anyway; usually astute, calculating, at times known to be something of a pest, barely coherent and draped between them, his own blood dribbling from his mandibles. The toes of his combat shoes on his hooves were bound to be shiny by now, though, dragging behind as they were, across the cobbled stones of the streets.

Lastly, around the corner came Acetylcholine, running backwards, spraying their recently vacated path with bullets from a cacophony of guns he seemed to be bristling with. Maestro didn't have any — the other two appeared to hold only their swords. It seemed they had heaped their arsenals onto the frazzled scientist so he might make better use of them while their own hands were full carrying Maestro along.

Acetylcholine tripped over a loose bit of debris, and stumbled flailing as he turned to make better time, catching up with the other three before turning again and continuing to shoot. It didn't take long at all for the surge of Flood forms to appear behind them, piling up at the corner and washing back along the way the street guided their flow, seeming to unroll along, their front rank in a perpetual state of replacement and trampling under.

Lone re-aimed his rifles and let fly. Each spike was perfectly fitted to the areas they had to fly through, raining past Flyer and Tejan close enough that the warriors could feel the heat coming from the loosed munitions sizzling past them. At first they thought they'd been hemmed in, and their speed haltered, until they realized it was only Lone — and there was no one else in his end of the street they were on. The Councilor had to duck to one side when another rocket sailed past, this one slamming into a much larger building than the last one had, and chipping away a small section of a pylon that as yet still stood.

Lone let the trio get past him before he started shooting again, mainly for reloading reasons, but when he saw the rocket's launcher come into view he also spotted a cannon. Protruding from the top was a stack of glowing rods, waiting to be cycled through and fired at them. He aimed at them, but it took many dozen rounds to get the target, as the Flood carrying it was moving altogether way too much. The spike that split the magazine rack on the cannon went all the way through and embedded in the next three Flood forms back, but the breach of containment followed its wake all the way. Fire and plasma broiled everything into ash and knocked the cross section of buildings the rest of the way down, shooting a hard blast wave

concentrated down the street at Ace, Lone, and the others. Lone braced, but Acetyl caught it broadside and was thrown brutally. The bigger Sangheili snapped outward, his lightning reflexes catching the wiry scientist by an elbow, and reeled him in, until the blast was through.

Combustibles burned steadily in the wake of the destruction, small fires flickering here and there all down the street. At the very far end, a single Combat form writhed, too damaged to rise. Everything else had been killed, and in the center even the guns that had been carried along were reduced to metal vapors curling off much reduced pools of gunmetal and ceramics. Lone straightened, and held Acetyl up so he could regain his own feet, but the first thing he did upon release was cringe and double over.

"Are you hurt?"

Acetyl took a breath, clamped his mandibles, and forced himself to stand straight. He looked at Lone. "You pulled my arm out of joint." He managed, through his clenched teeth.

"Apologies â€" but is it not better than smashing your entire body on some stone wall?"

Ace only nodded, turning away to close the gap between himself and the other three.

"Is this all there is, with you?" Lone asked, turning and following. "So fewâ€|"

Flyer ran a hand over his face, and then shook his head, loosening the gravel bits that had collected on his helm. "The more time goes by the more convinced I am that if I just had a cockpit to sit in, this whole mess would never have gotten this bad."

"I only wanted a bigger weapon." Tejan offered, tentative.

"Flood arms dealers drive hard bargains." Acetyl told him. "I have yet to find one whose price I could meet."

Flyer started to grin at the joke when he realized Acetyl wasn't grinning at it himself, he was grimacing, and for altogether other reasons. He let Maestro rest against Tejan, and took Ace's arm. Plucking his grasp from it, Flyer took his shoulder, and shoved the limb out and back so it was forced back into the socket. The telling crunch affirmed the set, as did Acetyl's protesting cry. Flyer let him sit, curling around the suddenly renewed agony in his shoulder, before he turned to see the Councilor.

"How come you're out here alone?" He asked. "I thought you would have been with the other Councilors."

"I chose my own path to spare them my disreputable mood." Lone stated, simply. "Is this all of you?"

"Yes, sir." Flyer said. "Where's everyone else, though? We haven't seen hide nor eye of anyone that wasn't Flood since before we got to Acetyl's labâ€| and then, it was mostly Brutes."

"They're out there somewhere, I imagine. The ones whose training was

complete, at any rate. I have personally seen at least three Flood forms carved from the bodies of fallen Sangheili. Thankfully, all the rest are Brute forms and I would have slain them anyway."

Flyer nodded. He was about to speak further when he noticed Acetyl's expression had gone from pained to puzzled. Knowing it could mean anything at all, he spared a look around before looking back at the seated scientist. "Ace? Whatâ€|?"

Acetyl looked up. "Who would Warbirds be referring to, Councilor, when he speaks of a female whose hold on life was faint?"

Both Lone and Flyer gave a start, and chorused, "What??"

"Turn your comn back on, Councilor, and I'll upload the data to it so you can hear." Acetyl instructed.

Lone turned it on again, puzzled what it could be that he'd missed, having spent all his time away from the others refusing to listen in on their frantic cries of pain and orders and begging for aid. Apparently something had just been wired through that was meant for him â€" and as he listened, he felt the world stop, suddenly and abruptly. "_Ah, Councilor, there is something here you must see. I recommend you make hasteâ€| she's fading fast."_

Could it be? He'd seen the empty imprint, but had imagined it the work of the Flood. Had she survived, despite, fooling everyone to think otherwise? He focused on the scientist as he picked himself up from the ground. "I don'tâ€| could it beâ€|?"

Acetyl lifted a small data pad from its resting place against his hip, hung by a cord from his belt. He looked back at the Councilor. "I know where he is."

"Do we investigate?" Flyer prompted, trying to make the Councilor restart his apparently frozen brain. It worked.

"Yes." He stepped past Flyer and scooped Maestro up, shouldering the limp warrior and giving Tejan a much-needed break from carrying him. "Let's move." He waited for Acetyl to take the lead, then followed him with such determination that Ace wondered if he might kill them all should he find more bad news at their destination.

The five made their way swiftly, cutting through often densely cluttered streets and at times through buildings that could not be gone around. Following the trail his electronic tracer built, they met with more Flood, though notably less than before, and a small band of surviving New Covenant. Cutting a swath through these seemed second nature to the Councilor, as it seemed he was holding to a hope none of the others understood the grounds for. Even without releasing Maestro from his grasp, he cut down the enemy, although his method appeared revised for it. Lone was determined and dead-set on his destination, whatever it might be, and come what may.

With Acetyl leading and Flyer and Tejan taking up the rear, the five blew through masses of dead and masses more of living enemy, cutting through and around ruins and rubble, at one point needing to pause long enough to crest a small cliff face that presented itself in their path. Bigger than the others, Lone jumped up, caught the edge, and pulled himself up in a one-armed chin-up maneuver, but the others

had to hop between shorter spans to make it. Climbing back to his hooves, Lone paused to consider the thin slice of visible decking he could see down a half collapsed alleyway. The purple stain above it had to make it the gravity lift for the ship they were under.

He looked at Acetyl. "Is this supposed to be our destination?" He asked, tartly.

"No, sir â€" according to these readings, Warbirds is above usâ€" He looked up from the data pad, and raised a pointing finger. "Up there."

Lone paused to raise his head, and look up. "Inside the ship?"

"Yes, as best as I can tell."

"Thenâ€" they've taken it from the New Covenant?" He stepped down the crumbling alleyway, smashing the end open so he could pass, and stepped out to see as more of the collecting Mirrator were whisked up the beam, at the backs of several appointed guards.

"It would seem they have, sir, yes." Acetyl answered. Lone surveyed the area, noting among the evicted dead lay the shredded corpse of a Sharquoi, and wondered which of his brethren had slain it. He started forward, unsure what to expect now. He'd come so farâ€" but even as he tried to control his composure, he knew it was written plainly on his features. Handing Maestro to Flyer, he stepped into the beam, and was whisked away up into the belly of the ship that had until now meant little beyond whether or not he was rained on.

His cape was still soaking wet, as was his under suit, but even as his hooves settled on the deck plating of the cruiser's grav-lift chamber, he lost sight of all care for such mundane nuisances. Quickly he left the room, and started down the corridors looking for Warbirds. What had he meant? Who was he speaking of? The first warrior he came upon in the mostly still empty ship was a familiar face; Lai Tasha.

"Lone!" He greeted, surprised to see him. "What brings you so soon?"

"I received a radio transmission, and wished to investigate it." He answered, wondering for just a moment if it had even been for him to hear. "Warbirds â€" ."

"You came all this way because of War?" Lai asked. "I'd look in the medical bay, were I you, brother."

"He's the one who sent it." Lone explained.

Lai nodded. "Come." He turned, and began to lead the way to the aforementioned chamber.

Beneath the vessel, Maestro watched through bleary eyes as his companions pulled him up the metal slope that was the edging of the lift platform. Nothing hurt anymore, but he knew it was only because it had all gone numb â€" that or some special nerve had been severed or destroyed. As his weight was lifted from the surface, though, he smiled weakly; it was an odd sensation, weightlessness, in his current condition, but he was perfectly lucid. It was the first time

in a short while that he'd been able to hold his own head up. He noticed almost before anyone else did, though, when a breaking wave of infection forms swarmed the east corner of the rubble-strewn area, and he pulled free of Flyer's grasp to sink back to the deck again.

"Flood!" He shouted, pointing, and the sentries posted around the platform began to gather and shoot. Fragile infection forms burst without resistance, but their sheer numbers seemed to swell and grow even as they were decimated. Eventually they overran the east corner and began closing the distance between there and the platform deck. One by one the Mirrator'd backed onto it, still firing as they went, as they rose, until they couldn't see what they were shooting at anymore. Maestro was still at the bottom, though; and he realized this was going to be a problem when the infection forms crested the edge. He looked up, back the way he'd come, at the last of the retreating and disappearing warriors he'd warned, and wondered if it was worth it.

"There is no way this is fair." He moaned, lowering his gaze back to the infection forms swarming towards him across the deck. "Someone powerful must truly hate me."

Even as the last word left his mouth, he felt the deck shudder, as the mechanism let go of the anchors it had put down and rose back to meet the cradle on the ship it had arrived in. That was beyond bad for heath "€" the mating of one part to the next was next to perfect. He would be crushed between them, with or without Flood in his veins.

Taking the first one to get close enough, he flung it at its brethren with a snarl, breaking three for the effort. If he still retained his wit, if he even survived this, he was going to rethink his priorities.

****Scene Thirty-two **_**Dereliction and Sacrifice**_**

Longsword Flyer slid into the seat at the controls of the ship he was in, and let his fingers play lightly across them all before keying in a sequence of commands. The machine hummed to life, accepting them, and reacted accordingly. Flyer smiled, broadly. Here, he was home, in his element. It had been a while since he'd flown anything this big, but he adjusted to the width and breadth of the craft easily enough once he had her moving. She responded beautifully; he suspected some unorthodox upgrades were in place, but at the moment he was only just starting her moving away from the Flood infested moon.

Behind him, members of the upper echelons of the Mirrator'd milled about, some manning stations, some speaking with those who were manning the stations. A proximity alarm suddenly spoke to him, and a moment of panic rushed through him; a heartbeat later, the stab of plasma raced past the port aft flank, searing the shielding there and speaking of desire to cook their engines right off their rear.

He swore colorfully, and turned the ship to spit back. How dare they mark his brand new bird like that! He hadn't had her even an hour yet!!

"Flyer! No! Left or right, but don't fly over there!" Soulguard was suddenly saying, sounding urgent.

Puzzled as to why but obediently, Flyer swerved his moving ship from its original course. "Can I know why?" He asked, sounding half distracted.

Soulguard made a small noise, muttered under his breath. He, too, sounded distracted.

"Say again?"

"In a moment." He repeated, louder. "Alright, that should do it."

"I'm getting a lot of small craft asking for entry." Someone else piped up. "Could you let the shields down, Flyer?"

He growled under his breath, but he did so. "Not for long. Tell them to be unceremonious and hurry it up. I need those things up and hot, because our fellow landed cruiser has decided to shoot at us."

"Understood."

"I've never known him to be that way." He heard someone else mutter, likely to a second bystander.

"He's very protective of his craft. Nothing will make him want to murder you more than scratching the paint on his Longsword fighter." Came the reply.

Another plasma blast raked the nose. "ARE THEY IN YET???" Flyer demanded, his teeth bared and gritted together.

"No! yes!"

"They had better be!" Flyer hit the controls to reactivate the shielding, and just in time to endure a direct hit to the starboard side. "Alright, you stinking apes! You've asked for it!" He snarled, sending command after command down the lines and causing the ship to roll in the atmosphere, strafing the other cruiser while avoiding another strike. It was one of the more risky maneuvers, and a lesser skilled pilot would have plowed the craft into the dirt in such a manner that it could never fly again. Flyer, for all his prowess, was having a little difficulty not doing just that, but he righted their heading and axis at the correct time, thus averting certain disaster. The cruiser ahead of them split open in a gush of fire and heat, waves of transparent ripples contorting the air around it as blast waves sought open freedom. Flyer grinned a feral grin, rolling the ship up from the moon's atmosphere and breaking the upper layers into open vacuum before something behind them detonated rather spectacularly.

"HOLY MOTHER!" Flyer shrieked, stabbing at more thrust to counter the sudden external push the craft was suffering from behind. Shields pulsed wildly, draining off power like an open wound losing blood under water, until they spent and the explosion crumpled their aft. "No, no, no, no, no!" He slapped in more command sequences, demanding the ship respond, but it slurred in reply and listed to port, until a distressingly large chunk of moon swung over in its odd axis flip and slammed hard into the upper decking. The ship groaned heavily,

spun out of the way of the loosed chunk of earth, and the whole ship rotated oddly itself until Flyer got a good look at the remains of their old base. "Forerunners." It was barely audible, but his eyes were bigger than they had ever been before.

"I guess now we know what a moon looks like after three class seven power generators pop on it's surface." Soulguard mentioned, from behind him somewhere.

"That was the _power_???" Flyer asked, slowly beginning to cycle his brain back down to physical motor function again, and seeing what systems remained them. Most of them were still there " but at half power due to the enormous strain in the odd form of attack the shields had endured.

"Focus, Flyer. Get us clear." Lai spoke, having just arrived.

"Clearing, clearing" Flyer resumed dialing the command console, righting their position and sending their trajectory in another direction. "Oh" I don't know if this is a good time to mention this or not, but we are _not_ in any condition for space combat."

"The third cruiser." Lai acknowledged. "Does it see us?"

"Oh, I'd say they do" considering they're hailing." Flyer sighed. "We're cooked"

"Keep heart, brother, we're not finished here yet." Soulguard replied. "Do they think we're one of theirs or something? Such a fool's hope" He lent his hand to a console next to where he was standing, and listened to what the Brute at the other end had to say.

"_Ah, you have answered. Do not expect me to just take that you are still who I sent forward, cowering under the same skin. Name yourself, whoever you are that deigns to steal a ship from my Brutes." _

Soulguard looked at Lai, and the two shared a shrug. "What can I say?" He asked. "You have me at a disadvantage." He played with the calibration of some of the sensors, getting a good reading off their opposing vessel. "But since I am going to ensure you can neither cry for help nor live past this day, I may as well tell you who it was that killed you." He glanced over at Flyer, and gave a short, curt nod when the pilot looked back. "I am Soulguard Vasmodomee, High Councilor and honored member of the Mirratord."

There was a short pause at the other end, then, _"So! The fabled unequalled House of Vas sends its eldest child to challenge me! I confess myself disappointed, Councilor. I could have expected more from you. You have proven how weak and pathetic your people are! You will all be crushed beneath the honored boots of the Noble Jiralhanae! Now you will die!"_

Soulguard shared an amused grin with Lai. "Someone's full of themselves today." He severed the communication link and tapped in a few more commands before looking back at Lai Tasha. "Did Lone ever return?"

Lai nodded. "I saw him."

"Do we know how many made it off the moon before it blew?"

"Most of us â€" some were slain long before the generators popped, I'd note."

Soulguard nodded, attempting to be satisfied with that. "Did you see Aozora?"

"I did."

"How is he?"

"Better, nowâ€¦ he mentioned to me that he'd never broken quite so many ribs all in one go in a long, long time."

"Being stomped by a Sharquoi can do that to a body, I imagine." Soulguard muttered. "Flyer, are we ready?"

"First volley away, Councilor."

He looked up. "What? We've fired?"

Flyer shook his head. "No sir â€" they did."

"Can you evade?"

"At this range? Indefinitely. But we cannot hope to nail them squarely either until we close some of this open space."

"Do what you do best, Flyer. Make us proud." Soulguard nodded to Lai Tasha, turned, and left the Command Chamber.

Flyer focused on the icon representing the other ship. "I am a leaf on the wind." He told it, smiling. "Watch me as I soar."

****Scene Thirty-three **_**Death Before Dishonor**_**

Aozora grimaced as he shrugged his recently reconstructed armored vest over his shoulders, feeling every ache he'd acquired over the course of the last forty-eight hours. It was rough, fighting things like Flood and Sharquoi, but he knew he hadn't been the one to defeat either. Soulguard had cut the creature down, and he'd also been the one to set those delayed time-charges under the catwalk on the generators so all evidence of their presence would vanish. He looked up when the aforementioned turned up again, and suddenly. "Admiral, come. I need ideas."

"Now?" Aozora begged, wishing for just one moment of peace to catch his breath.

"Unfortunately, yes. Now. We still have another cruiser full of Brutes to deal with, and undoubtedly that number will multiply the longer we stay." Soulguard informed him. "I have confirmation of at least another quartet." He turned, and left again, so Aozora followed him.

In the corridor, the pair continued their discussion. "What can I expect?" Aozora asked.

"We took some nasty hits from the pieces of the moon that just crumbled, so our base capability has been lowered somewhat. Flyer's at the helm, but even he can only dance for so long. We need a swift and sure execution of absolutes here, or we'll all die in one fell swoop when this cruiser goes down."

"Understood â€" what are our options at current? What do I have to work with?"

"I don't know. That's why I came to you. You need to gather your Strike Team and put some heads together. See what who knows that we don't, and see what options we do have that we don't know about."

"Yes, sir." Aozora steered towards the medical bay, and ducked in. There, he found Aardvark, Spartan 249, Evil, Noble Hunter, Warbirds, and Tejan, among others. Some of the members in the room were there solely for the sake of the ones that were actually wounded, but much of the medical emergency had faded and a kind of still and calm commanded the air in the place. He cast a look at Aardvark, pausing for a moment in sudden realization.

"Admiral?" Warbirds prompted.

"I justâ€" Aozora shook his head, and focused on his friend. "Warbirds. I need to know if there is anything we can use besides the cannons on the nose of this ship against our enemy."

Warbirds opened his mouth around an unhelpful comment, but before the first syllable could exit, someone else spoke past him. "I do."

Aozora looked over, seeing Tejan standing off to one side. "What would that be?"

"Acetylcholine built something. I don't know what he called it, but he didn't get to finish building the containment for it. He said it would use outside energy to fuel itself, making it an un-useable option. Anything that it destroys will make its blast radius bigger."

Aozora's expression turned interested. "Where is the good scientist now?"

"I don't knowâ€" I lost sight of him shortly after Maestro got free and was left behind."

"Left behind?" Aozora asked. "Someone was left behind, alive, on the moon we just cracked in half?"

"I don't think so, sirâ€" he was in no condition to walk, and was still on the lift platform when it pulled anchor." Tejan shook his head. "Acetylcholine was furious, but then he left the room and I haven't seen him since."

Aozora sighed. "What frequency is his comm on?"

"The same as mine is." Came another, deeper voice from the opposite side. Aozora turned, to see The Lone Heretic holding his comm out to

him. He took it, and looked at it, then opened a channel using it.

"Acetyl? This is Aozora, I need to speak with you. Are you listening?"

There was a moment of white noise before a reply piped through. "_I am, Admiral. Though I have to wonder why you'd want my opinions on anything when you tend to take Evilkitty's word with three grains of salt."_

"I'm told you built something that will make a big bang." Aozora said, cutting to the chase. "Do you still have it?"

There came a sigh. "_Nothing you say will make me set that thing off without containment, Admiral, threaten all you like. I'm not using it, and that's final."_

"Ace, this is something of an emergencyâ€|"

"_Not going to happen, Admiral!"_ Acetyl insisted.

Aozora sighed. "Look, Acetyl, I know you feel strongly about this, but I can't sit back and allow your honorary scientific inhibitions get us all killed. Now I need you to consider its use, and I want you to tell me what it does and how, and where we can apply it, because we're running on empty here â€" we have a broken ship with half powered shielding against an entire armada that is about to appear right on top of us." He paused for breath. "So tell me, Acetyl, what'll it beâ€| your code, or your life? Because one of them has got to go."

Acetyl grumbled something rather nasty about the bloodlines that Aozora had come from, but presently he responded. "_I didn't get to finish it, so there's no containment. It's got a sub-atomic breaker aligned with the charge detonator, which uses the surrounding elements as fuel â€" without containment, this means everything_ will get consumed and obliterated. If I set it off, and there's no telling how much of a time delay it will have either, it could do one of two things â€" fizzle and sit pretty for the rest of eternity, or blow out everything inside a three thousand AU radius, given sufficient fuel to do so. Is that what you wanted to hear?"_

Impressed, Aozora spent a moment thinking before he responded. "Sounds like a hell of a bang."

"_It would be one, yesâ€| and since everything eventually breaks down into energy at some point, anything and everything will be converted to fuel the bang. If given enough starter fuel to work with, it could easily erase a solar system from existence. And I mean the whole bloody thing, Admiral, not just reduce it to smaller particles. I mean decimate and disperse the matter until it was all converted into energy, and then consume the energy. It would be about as bad as getting turned into nothing could be, scientifically speaking."_

"No idea of a time delay, you say?"

"_That's right."_

Aozora gave a soft whistle. "Alright, put whatever work you need to into this thing â€" but get it ready for deployment in case we need it to be used. As soon as it becomes clear we aren't going to get away in one piece, I want you to launch this thing at the sun."

"_The sun, sir? You _want_ the solar system to disappear?"_

"No traces, Ace. You know that."

"_Well, I'm going to need some heavy lifting done, then, else all that will happen is the sun will boil the components away before it can go offâ€" if it decides to go off at all."_

Aozora nodded. "Understood â€" get it done. We're running out of time as it stands."

There came a dejected sigh. "_No one listens to meâ€"_" And then he turned his comn off, presumably to keep from hearing any more bad news. Aozora smiled, and handed the unit in his hand back to Lone.

"Hunter, go find someone who knows a thing or two about hard nosed munitions and help him get Ace's device set and prepped for launch." Receiving an acknowledging nod from Noble Hunter, Aozora turned and left, to track down Soulguard and give him the interesting news.

As Aozora made his way up, Hunter went down â€" he knew only one person who specialized in launched munitions that weren't either photon or plasma fueled. His real name was something of a small mystery, but the members all called him Folded Steel; for the sole reason that he often could be found folding steel over various shapes and forms, turning the raw sheet material into workable and useable items. If anyone knew how to launch a physical item, presumably on a rocket of some kind, it would be Steel.

Arriving at the area where he thought he might find Steel, Hunter found him sitting for once in silence, looking either bored or contemplative. "Steel. Got a job for you."

He looked up, interest showing in his bright eyes. "Doing what?"

"We have to get some device of Ace's close enough to the sun to feed energy from it, without melting the device."

"Really! Fascinatingâ€" Steel got up, making Hunter feel small. If the two had been Earth animals, Steel would have been a grizzly and Hunter a jaguarâ€" not small and not slight, Hunter was powerful in his own way, but he didn't imitate the ancient ways of the smithy, which had bulked Steel up to the point of overwhelming anyone else save the bigger males who stood over him in height. The fact that he did what he did for the enjoyment of it had only built him faster. Now he was solid as a rock and broad and thick as one, too â€" Hunter wondered if the warrior couldn't pick up a Brute and walk off with it without breaking a sweat. As the pair made their way towards the sectors of the ship that Ace could be found in, immersed in various mechanical odds and ends since he wasn't liable to be receiving anything like his old lab for a long time. "â€" so what does this device do?" Steel asked.

"From what I heard, nothing good." Hunter admitted. "He said it was a bomb thing without containment."

"Containment is essential â€" in certain Human munitions, the bomb doesn't go off unless it has containment."

"Apparently, this particular kind of bomb will go off depending only on how it's feeling that dayâ€| probably much deeper math and higher physics and broader science than we're used to. He said it would do one of two things upon being triggered â€" one, pop the whole solar system into the next oblivion, or two, just fizzle and sit pretty, as he put it."

"Sounds like my kind of gun. All bluff, bite only if it feels like it."

"Well, it'd really stink if we set it off hoping to cover our tracks with it and all it did was fizzle."

"Well, true." Steel amended. "So what are you going to do?"

"The Imperial Admiral sent me to get you â€" nonspecifically â€" and then to help Ace get this hammer built before we run out of time to need to bother."

"Is the third cruiser giving us that much trouble?" Steel asked.

"I'd say it's a mite more trouble than just one cruiserâ€| more like five of them, and ours is wounded from being smacked by a section of our old moon."

Steel nodded, passing through the door to see Ace picking at something with micro tools, staring down at it with a powerful magnifier over his eyes. He tried to look up when he heard the door open, but all that did was crease his features with a puzzled expression.

"Good god. What happened to you?"

"I've been magnified, is what." Steel grinned at him, before reaching over and flipping Ace's lenses up. "Hi."

Ace blinked. "Oh. Right. I need a launching case that's durable enough to withstand the temperatures of the sun but built so that it will pop open at the same time that this little guy decides to do his magic." He held up the half-built device.

"Okay, now I'm creeped out." Hunter decided. "I've heard of people naming their weapons, but giving their pet projects genders is just way out there."

"I was speaking metaphorically. Oh, and no pressure â€" but we only have about an hour before all hell breaks loose on us and the project turns to wasted brain function." Acetyl responded. "I just received Flyer's calculations for the Brute fleet's arrival."

Steel looked around, noting how much stuff the scientist had accumulated in the few short hours he'd been aboard already, and immediately spied some good candidates for their project. One was a

violet block of grade-12 armor plating that had likely been stolen from engineering. He smiled. It wasn't everyday he got to play with grade-12 metal. "Hunter, come with me. We have some shaping and welding to do" he moved for it, swiping it from the floor and taking it to the other side of the room, where some cutting and brazing tools were, taking one up in hand and testing it on open air before looking back at Hunter. "Get some tinted eye protection while you're at it."

At the far end of the ship, Aozora stepped through the bridge right as the gravity generators suffered a power surge spiked through a short that was caused by a bad hit from the enemy cruiser. The whole ship shuddered, and threw everyone to their knees, but before Aozora dropped he was thrown from his balance against the door frame. Gasping in pain that reminded him his ribs hadn't healed yet, he curled an arm around his middle as he clawed at a nearby console, seeking his feet. "What" what is the situation?" He rasped.

Lai Tasha reached over, and lifted him straight, before letting go again. "Should you really be out of the medical, Admiral?"

"I refuse to die lying down." Was all the response he got.

Flyer complained loudly in wordless cry as he fought with inertia, momentum and speed, throwing the massive cruiser around like it was a small, fleet little fightercraft. In fact if it had been one, he would have yet to have been hit at all. As it were, he kept getting grazed, and it was wearing at his nerves. "Have we got something of interest happening back there, sirs, or are your comments behind my head just idle chat?" He strained, through gritted and bared teeth.

"I have Ace working on something." Aozora offered. "From what he told me of it, I think it should do the trick."

"What is it?" Lai asked, as Soulguard looked up and over at them.

"Some kind of quantum bomb, by my best guess." Aozora responded. "But I need to know if we have the main stardrives " can we get into sub space, Flyer?"

"Uh" sure?" Flyer replied, working around another dodging maneuver. "But don't we want to erase that we were ever here, first?"

"I have that taken care of. I want you to wind up the sub space drives and keep them hot " because as soon as my plan pops, we'll need to get as far and as fast away from here as we can " and that means inside the heartbeat it happens in."

Flyer seemed to stall for a moment, before continuing. "understood."

"How long until the Brute fleet arrives?" Aozora asked, beginning to be able to let go of his aching ribs. He paused when he realized he could see the answer to his own question appear in brilliant flowers of blue and violet as cruisers fell out of sub space right on top of them. "Ah, hell." He muttered, tapping his comm. "Hunter, status?"

Back at the far end of the ship, Acetyl was just settling the device into the cradle Hunter and Steel had made, fitting it down so it wouldn't move about. He looked up at Hunter when his expression changed slightly, and knew it had to be the Admiral calling for an update. He frowned deeply at the warrior, well aware what he was thinking. Turning to Steel, he motioned for the nose cap, and secured it with explosive bolts tied into a command matrix that was also directly tied into the activation switch for the device beneath it. Hunter remained quiet, even as the entire room shook violently as the ship attempted to buckle, ripples working their way across the hull plating as other areas of it turned to vapor and swarmed away from the craft.

Finally, all three in fully sealed armored suits, Ace touched the control on the wall to open the shuttle bay's door. He watched as the force field faded from view and all the air around them washed out in a single, swift, sucking motion, then motioned quietly in the thrall of an almost anti-grav influence on the precipice of just that. Hunter handed the missile pod to Steel who primed the jets, then heaved it hard over his shoulder through the door out into vacuum.

Ace watched as it hit hard vacuum and retained the last half of its momentum, before then generating its own thrust as the jet in the tail ignited and pushed it off farther from the ship they were in. In the silence of his own helmet, Acetylcholine said to himself, "All's well that ends with a bang." He held up the data pad in his hand, and watched as it read off the temperature readings detected by the sensors he'd implanted in the nose of the pod. At first the number was a pretty nice eight digits negative, but it slowly ticked over to positive and began to climb as it neared the blue dwarf sun it was set to consume.

Already he could no longer see it, vanished into the bright light of the star that seemed just an arm's reach away, but he knew it was still there, and they needed more time for it to get closer before he could activate anything and have it work at all. The only thing that stood to be gained or lost now was in the quantum odds of Schrödinger's cat. Would it ignite? Would it fizzle? Acetyl had to admit that he was a little excited to know if the cat would live or die. For so long, it had sufficed with being simply gone — caught in a quantum limbo between survival and death. It took a moment for him to come to the realization that the bomb was not the cat — the Mirrator was.

He gave a sudden, strangled, protesting noise, suddenly wanting his device back, wanting more time to put more work into it, to even the odds from a guess. It had been built on the premise of blueprints he had only just completed and never tested, after all. This would be his fifteen seconds of glory — right before he either caused them all ruin, killed them all horribly, or erased all knowledge of them and saved their demise for some other day.

The temperature readings began to fluctuate, signaling it was almost too late to fire the bolts, as the missile had begun to melt. A stab of plasma cut the scene in half for a moment, missing its target and startling the scientist back to life. Quickly he touched the activating switch — and stared in despair and horror when it read back a malfunction — the bolts had not fired, melted back into place and welded down even as it began to slough off of its own accord.

"No!" Acetyl begged, tapping in more commands that the missile pod could undoubtedly do nothing with now. "Oh, no." he moaned, sure he'd just killed them allâ€| death by cruiser firing squad, here.

And suddenly, a brilliant flash appeared on the sun's surface, widening his eyes in newfound horror, as he clawed at his comm, trying desperately to turn it on, even as the flare began to grow at an exponential rate. Finally, it came on. To save time and trouble and perhaps everyone's lives, he generalized the signal so _everyone_ heard it â€" and that meant if a Brute was close enough, he'd hear it too.

"GET US OUT OF HERE RIGHT NOW!!!"

At the helm, Flyer punched in the final command to push them into slip space, well aware of that dangerous burning flare that had shown up suddenly on his screens as the demon of the devil's nightmares, growing like it meant to burn everything to ash. The sun had dimmed, but the flare had gotten bright enough that it was barely noticeable. The ship shook as if having a grand mal seizure, rattling things loose even as the tear in sub space closed behind them, leaving them in a kind of artificial calm, away from the storm.

He breathed out slowly, as the last of the inship tremors quieted, and turned around to see the two Councilors and the Imperial Admiral behind him. "I am a leaf on the wind." He rasped, laughing to be alive but still terrified to the point of his voice barely coming through. "Watch meâ€| watch me as I soar."

One by one, the rest joined in his mirth â€" it truly was good to be alive, this day.

****Scene Thirty-four **_**Last Call**_**

Spartan 249 opened his bleary, augmented eyes, and stared numbly at the ceiling above him for a moment before rolling them to the side to follow a brief motion there. Slowly as the world came back into focus, he began to recognize shapes, faces, and names surfaced in his memory. Warbirds reclined nearby on another medical flat, staring past his raised knee upon which he'd rested an elbow, but it took him a moment to realize why the next person down was also staring in the same direction with the same expression on their face.

Pressing his elbows into the foam pad on the flat he was laid out on, 249 turned his gaze past his own feet, looking at what lay beyond. There, under some serious monitoring and maintenance equipment, he recognized Aardvark, her features a little pale and drawn, an IV in her arm. Quickly he drew the conclusion that she must have just come out of surgeryâ€| but he still lacked why. Last he'd heard of the female was that she was dead. The thought train ended as he focused closer to home, sitting the rest of the way up as he looked himself over. There was a thin gauze wrap around his right hand, but the rest of him looked normal â€" given any time at all in the sun, he'd develop an olive complexion, but for the time being, more or less fresh out of his suit of Mjolnir armor, his skin was next to transparent. Because of this he could see the faint olive lines drawn through the veins in his wrist, but they were just that â€" faint, and thin.

He sighed. At least he was still Humanâ€| he looked up again when he

heard the door open, and on reflex he struggled to his feet as soon as he recognized the Imperial Admiral entering. The motion caught everyone's attention, and he was soon pressed back onto the flat, made to sit whether he wanted to or not. "You need to rest." He was told. "Formalities can wait another day."

"What happened?" he asked, relaxing onto his seated pose. "Where are we? I don't recognize this place."

"You're on the Dereliction and Sacrifice, Spartan." A Human voice put in. He turned his head the other way, to see 09 without his own armor on — he looked no darker than 249, having clocked as many hours out of the Mjolnir suit in the sun. "Welcome back to the living."

"Iâ€| died?" 249 asked, puzzled.

"No, but the Flood spores in your blood were trying to spread and take over." The Sangheili on his left answered. "You're a strange creature to be sure, howeverâ€| your own immune system somehow knew what to do and kept them from spreading until we could clean them out."

"It did?" He asked, astonished.

"Everyone! Look!" Someone else insisted. Heads turned in accordance with the beckon, to see Aardvark had woken, turned her head, and was watching them converse.

"I thought she was dead â€" ." 249 began.

"So did a number of the rest of us." Warbirds answered. "But she somehow crawled from her grave and found me on the precipice of mine, right before we took this ship and made a run for it."

"I found her, actually." Said another voice, which while still Sangheili was that of a female. 249 peered past Warbirds to see Kuro no Alice, standing hipshot next to Aozora. "Me and Evilkitty."

"It seems to me that no matter how far dispersed we get, somehow we all come back to one another by some means or other at some point." The Admiral put in, resting a hand on his mate's shoulder as he spoke. "So many of us were thought lost, and were regained. Those who were thought dead, returned to life. And might I note," He added, turning his gaze directly to 249, "those of us who seemed most luckless were the most fortunate of us all."

As the ship spun gently on an axis, the light of a nearby star peeked through the large transparent metal windows and touched lightly on the occupants of the room, for a moment drowning the artificial lighting out completely. Farther out, a planet came into view, lush and green, but small, spinning serenely in the background under the light of the brilliant, but small, sun.

It was another blue dwarf star.

Aardvark's hoarse, weak voice carried through the following silence, breaking it and the alien spell the sight seemed to have on everyone else; "That's because we're a team, Admiral."

He nodded to her, as Lone stepped through the door and strode towards her. "That we are, lady Aardvark. Indeed, that we are." He wrapped his arm around Kuro, and she smiled.

The next time the door slid open, it revealed Lai Tasha; and after looking at everyone present, he crossed his arms. "Well, won't Rage be ecstatic to hear about this mess we got ourselves through." He grinned, then, and shook his head. "Ah, but so do run the sands of fate and timeâ€|"

"All else is dust and air." Lone responded, voicing his own motto.

"You live what you've learned." Aozora countered, grinning. "But this was one hell of a lesson to learnâ€| a whole solar system! Wowâ€| what a thing to live through, hm?"

This illicit a number of embarrassed chuckles from various members around the room.

Aardvark smiled at them all, her free hand wrapped through one of Lone's. "We have lived to laugh about it laterâ€| and laugh we do."

â€|**CREDITSâ€|**

****Strike Team****

Aozora

Warbirds

Evilkitty

Aardvark

Spartan Sol 249

Soulshadow Man

Wildfire

****Spartans****

SpArTaNo9

Spartan Sol 249

****High Councilors****

Lai Tasha

An REG Omega

Soulguard

The Lone Heretic

****Honored Members****

Kuro no Alice

Longsword Fighter

Acetylcholine

Maestro

Tejan55

Mr. Evil 37

Noble Hunter

Folded Steel

Walk

Just following the fire

Stride

Eyes on the path ahead

A stout tome of records of lies

A brazened memory of agonized cries

A vendetta stone of ulterior motives

A grace of words in ceramic votives

Break a promise, broken vow

The death of one we did not know

Fighting the veil over our eyes

Surfacing with a breath in crimson skies

Run

May the object of our wrath

Fall

A whisper of zephyrs' calling

We don't need to hear the lies

Of a path long ago lost to time

We can see our own way out now

Bearing weight of knowing how

_Reconciliation, revelation, transformation from the dark are
we_

Under the light at last we now realize there is so much to see

_On our own, destruction of a bitter path downwards into
disease_

Because nothing can hold us back now that we know we are free! WE
ARE THE FREE

****Credits trailer****

Blur slowly gave way to clarity, as the image slowly came into focus. It seemed weird, yet somehow it felt normal enough; context kicked in, and some old memory reeled through the background, trolling for relevant data.

Audio receptors clicked on, and at first all that came through was a faint buzzing hum, before this faded with proper calibration. Faint at first, a familiar voice piped through.

Lights came on, as the camera lens dilated during zoom, focusing on a Sangheili face behind a magnifying headset. His name surfaced; Actyl'kolin, though mostly referred to as Acetylcholine. He glanced up, noticed the camera was active, and cast it a strange smile.

He appeared to check some reference on the data pad he always kept tied to his belt, then let it hang as he checked some power relays attached to the mechanism. Finally, he looked back at the camera, and in his usual chipper tone put forth his best greeting;

To the camera, he said, "Welcome back, Maestro."

A fuse blew, and the room went dark.

Seemingly disembodied, the same voice, in the same tone, added, "Shit."

****THE END ****

End
file.